FICTION?

STRANGE DAYS RADIO

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Selected Cases of Paranormal Investigator Jonathan Barron

CASES

~The Long Night Awaits
~Turtle of World
~Odd Fellows
~When Earth Whispers
~The Greenlandic Windows

Mickey Hunt

Chaotic Terrain Press

“Blue Spotted Crawdad”

Strange Days Radio

Mickey Hunt

Chaotic Terrain Press
230 Jones Cove Road
Asheville, NC 28805

828-575-7300
anaktuvuk@earthlink.net

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These cases appear to be works of fiction.

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Strange Days Radio

“Strange Days Have Found Us.”

“Floral Fungus”

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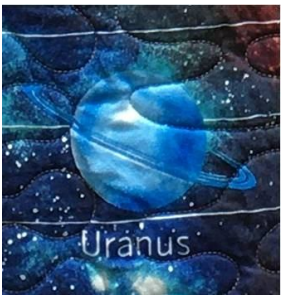

JTB

Inspired

by

JPW

The Long Night Awaits

1.
Therapist

A particular sleep patient of mine possesses an unusual condition that is ending up straying far outside my professional and medical expertise. I'm recording this account as the story unfolds in the hope of shedding light on what may be an increasing phenomenon in our technical, postmodern world—what I call Eternal Night Disorder. He claims that each of his nights lasts an entire year.

Allow me to begin with a brief summary of my background.

My mother grew up in Camas, a small papermill town along the Columbia River. My parents were weather researchers, and when I was a child, they took my older brother and me along with them when they spent the winters in the Norwegian archipelago, Svalbard, where they were based. We boys attended the school there. Our town was about midway between the mainland of Norway and the North Pole, and far north of the Arctic Circle. We enjoyed all the winter sports, and when not outside, read around the clock, it seemed, both fiction and non-fiction. My parents' project lasted three years.

After that time, we only traveled in summers and we went to school in Camas during the other three seasons. Then for me, years of college, grad school, a doctorate, and special training.

After Dawn and I married, she and I settled back in Camas. Though children never came, we thought then, like my parents, that the town would be a good place to raise them. The papermill employed nearly 3,000 people in those days,

and many of the departments ran 24 hours a day with three eight-hour shifts: Days, Swing Shift, and Graveyard. That's what everyone called them. Many of my sleep therapy patients felt they needed help with circadian rhythm disorders, but my practice also treated many other conditions as well, and a number of patients traveled to my office from Portland-Vancouver, which was important for my practice as the papermill began closing down.

The career of sleep therapist came naturally to me because ever since adolescence, I've been a classic insomniac. In high school, I began reading self-help books, and with time, I found that other people had similar problems. Not only did I learn ways to adapt to, cope with, and remediate my own disorder, I was able to make a solid living working with hundreds of patient/clients through the years to improve their sleep and their lives.

There is, however, the one exception to my pattern of success.

My patient can express his condition far better than I can, and there's a reason for this, which will become clear, so with his permission, I will offer extracts from his sleep journal, add a few of my own comments, and allow you to reach your own conclusions. The journal begins the night before the first time he came to see me.

2.
The Patient

Circular patches of lamplight line the wooden sidewalks on both sides of the square. Behind each walkway loom square blocks of buildings, their windows squares of black. A person here, a person there, creep along the walkways, passing in and out of the doors. The lights fade. Heavy horizons of sooty cloud are blocking the stars. I can't move. A massive sooty

beast lumbers up, knocks me to the frozen ground, and crushes my skull in its teeth. I'm crying out in terror.

Heart pounding, breath rushing, I wake from the nightmare into a nightmare.

Another night. Another endless night. As always and forever, the clock creeps along like a glacier, a river of ice flowing in inhuman, lifeless, geologic time. Hours have passed, but when I look at the clock's second hand, it hasn't moved more than a tick or two. Again, I regret that I have no companion to pass the time with or to dispel the illusion. But it's not illusion. A night is as a year.

It began one normal year and two days ago. Or 367 years for me. It was a normal day and then came the sunset and darkness. Time simply stopped, or seemed to stop. The moon paused, frozen in the sky. The stars ceased to spin overhead. Jet airplanes hung high in the air. The world is silent. A coyote trots down the middle of the street, but he is awake! Does he, too, experience the eternal night?

I'm not sure how I lived through the first months. Through the first shock and sense of unreality. Paralyzing desolation so deep it can not be described, but if it could be put into words, they would drive the listener into his own lethal despair.

You must understand that for me, this was a very long time ago. Not only is it difficult to remember and describe that first year and the beginning of the second year when I realized the eternal night was repeating, any lingering pain of it passed away long ago.

Any except the loneliness, of course…

After overcoming the recurring impulses to end my own life and after becoming resigned to my condition, I began to

explore the world by going on long walks, at first for just an hour or two, and then extending into weeks or longer.

My car wouldn't start, the phone didn't work, so I couldn't call a taxi, which didn't move anyway, and the buses just sat there on the road, so I walked. Whenever I got hungry or thirsty, I would duck into a store and help myself, always leaving money. If I didn't have money, I'd keep a tab and pay it by mail. People, of course, are awake and out and about in a normal night, and there were people: late-night party-goers returning home, early risers just beginning their day, delivery drivers, stocking clerks, police, burglars, runners, and other insomniacs—ordinary insomniacs out for a stroll. They weren't exactly frozen, but they were icy cold to the touch, and if I waited in one place, like for 36 hours or so, I could see they had moved a little.

There was a girl with her friends leaving an all-night restaurant. Some of them still carried programs from a concert they had attended earlier in the evening. It was winter and frost in the air. Snow was falling, but it never moved. The young people were bundled, their faces surrounded by a fog of their own breathing. I gently touched the girl on the cheek with the back of my fingers. Her skin, ruddy with the pleasure of the evening, felt like that of a corpse. When I drew my hand away, she looked fine, but when I came by later, her face bore a red mark, which within six hours turned into a blister. Since then, I never touched any frozen people again. Nights were bad and the days were worse, because I knew the long night waited. My daytime relationships seemed superficial and fleeting. I tried, but could never sustain a friendship or a romance through a year-long night of absence.

As I said, only nocturnal animals moved normally. A few rats, loose dogs, cats, bats, owls, and even coyotes. Not many, but some. Once, a mountain lion just before sunrise. They existed in the same night universe as me, and they were as terrified of

me as I was of them. They knew I didn't belong. I always wondered what they ate. Apart from noises you'd expect from animals when they were too close, the nights were dead silent, because sounds moved too slowly and low-pitched for me to hear anything but my own sounds. And, all the lights were dim, even the flashlights I used. Over the course of an endless night, my nocturnal vision became very keen. And on a clear sky with a full moon, it's almost as bright as day.

How do I know a night really lasts a year or longer?

I couldn't track the cycles of the moon. At first, I tried to count sleep cycles, because I did sleep, I just never knew for how long. I slept enough and seldom experienced signs of deprivation. This only gave me an estimate. But the main reason I know is because after replaying and exhausting every possible memory, and finding fantastical solutions to the major problems of the world to occupy my mind, and walking until I became more fit than I had been in all my decades of life, I learned to write and edit my own work. I wrote a collection of short stories, and even whole novels in a single ordinary night. Cheerful stories. I published them under a pseudonym—several of them in fact—and the reading and publishing world assumed that with this prodigious productivity, I had a cadre of ghostwriters.

Little do they know I am the ghost.

Something else eventually let me know the duration of a long night. I discovered early on that the physics of things close by moved in my pace. The closer to me, the more in synchronization. Light, water, food, and so on. So, I began wearing a wristwatch.

During the day, I never get enough of sunlight and life. I float through every day in a half-daze. The daylight hours fly by as I dread the inevitable coming of every dark night. At night, my

life of the daylight is no more real than the real world is to the dreamer. Only during twilight and later without sunlight, do I remain fully alert. And toward the end of every year as the weeks of dawn imperceptibly emerge, I feel the horror of not being able to fully engage with the living, waking world. If only I could sleep through the dark like everyone else and then play and work like a normal person. Long winter nights are unbearable, short summer nights only slightly less unbearable, and except that I learned to fight it off, all would have been depression, misery, loneliness, and despair.

Writing, thinking about the happy world, keeps me alive.

3.
Therapist

The patient had the above sleep journey entry hand-delivered to me early in the morning, which I thought surprising. I hadn't time yet to process what he wrote, so I suggested he submit to a full sleep study and then we'd begin weekly sessions. He agreed, but said he needed *daily* sessions. I told him that my schedule, regretfully, made this impossible, but to be sure, I'd check with my offsite secretary—my mother-in-law. My first intuit was that he had been severely traumatized by some past events, or had suffered a deep personal loss and that these had brought him to a place of experiencing psychotic hallucinogenic episodes manifested by darkness, all of which had formed a persistent delusion. Or they just could be vivid dreams. My first impression was of him being a normal, healthy person in every way. But I wanted to get biologic data first to see if there was some physical disorder. It would be interesting to see what was actually happening to him when he believed he was living for a year.

However, the sleep test results and blood work came back, and they were unremarkable, so absolutely no help there.

By our fourth session, I had concluded I couldn't help him, and I suggested he make an appointment with a psychiatrist colleague of mine, a person with vast experience in working internationally with severely traumatized people, victims of kidnapping, torture, or imprisonment, or of hostages or war veterans who suffered severe emotional, psychological damage from battle.

The patient laughed then and said his life, even though unnatural and unbelievable, was far more prosaic. But he then grew insistent, even angry, saying I was the only person alive who could help him.

"Why do you say this?"

Though I waited for an explanation, he said nothing. So, I said, "Frankly, since we clearly are at a turning point, I must say that I don't believe you—I don't believe that your nights last a year. But—and I don't think it's possible—but if you can prove to me this is true, then we'll continue to meet. I'll see if I can bring in someone else, someone not in traditional science or medicine, and we'll explore in that direction. What do you think?"

He smiled and said, "I'll bring you proof tomorrow!"

"It'll have to be quick. My time is limited."

"Excellent. I'll be in just prior to noon. But you realize, from my perspective, that's a whole year from now."

The next day, the patient arrived as he promised. I had just left the office to walk to my favorite restaurant for lunch. It was spring and all the trees and flowers in town were blooming in the fresh sunshine. He was waiting on a park bench just outside my door.

"Follow me," he said. He led me to a hired van stacked full of boxes, and the boxes were full of thick folders. Each folder contained a handwritten manuscript. "These are mine. I write six or seven of them in one night. And this does not include the hundred or so that I've published so far."

The driver at the wheel said over his shoulder. "Take all the time you want, sir. The meter's running. It's your dime."

I stared at the stacks in disbelief. "May I?" I asked the patient, indicating I wanted to look more closely.

"Help yourself."

I moved a few boxes and picked one at random. Opened it and picked a folder at random. "May I take it home to read?"

He hesitated before saying, "I guess so, sure. That story is one of my favorites, but I trust you. If you have time, though, get it photocopied first, and don't lose any pages."

I took the book home and read some. And the next day, I tried to call Jonathan T. Barron.

JTB. I only heard of him recently through the local newspaper. Apparently, he was some kind of paranormal investigator who hosted a popular program, Strange Days Radio. He was broadcasting on Saturday night of the upcoming weekend live from the Cascade Monster Sci-Fi Convention in Portland. Not my thing, but because my call to him had gone to voicemail, it was the only way to meet him.

The place was jammed with two kinds of people. Nerds and

kooks. The kooks moving in packs and wearing matching costumes. The nerds outfitted too neatly for the occasion. Anyway, I need not elaborate. JTB was to interview a Camas native who claimed to have had extensive experience with time something or other. I peeked into the ballroom where it was underway. The program had drawn quite a crowd, but it was of no interest to me.

However, in one of the side conference rooms, he had three assistants interviewing, or I should say, *screening* supplicants who wanted to personally tell JTB their paranormal stories. I could tell by the manner of the assistants that none of those people—or aliens and monsters—would qualify. I was thinking I had wasted my time, but what the heck, I was already here, so I waited through one of the lines.

"Okay. What have you got?" the assistant asked me.

"Ummm. I'm a licensed sleep therapist, and a patient of mine says each of his nights lasts an entire year."

He leaned forward and studied me closely. "Okay. How would you sum up the importance of your work?"

"That's a strange question."

The assistant shrugged his shoulders. "Answer it, or not."

"Certainly. By the end of every day, these minds of ours are exhausted, you might even say damaged, by the intensity of our consciousness. Sleep is a universal healer of the mind. Chronic sleep impairment or…"

"That's good," the assistant said, cutting me off. He leaned back in his chair, stuck his tongue to the inside corner of his mouth, and processed. It took a minute. At last he said, "Does your patient offer proof? An entire year?"

"He did. He showed me a van full of manuscripts he said he's written, probably more than a thousand. Here's a picture of the van. I brought a sample manuscript with me."

"Really?" He was suddenly interested. He took the folder, opened it, picked a page from the middle at random, and read a few paragraphs.

"It's well written," he said. "Do you believe him?"

"I don't know. I don't have a way to disprove him right now."

"Anything else to add?"

"Nothing comes to mind."

"Any spooky voices or floating lights or anything like that?"

"Of course not."

"Okay. Good. Do you have ID with you?"

I pulled out my driver's license and a copy of my respiratory care license.

He read my name out loud and returned the ID. "Okay, yeah. Can you hang around until 5 pm? He'll be wrapping his program, and taking a short break about then. There's a quick autograph session and then he can talk. He needs to be at the airport at 10 tonight."

"Sure, but I need to be home before dark. I don't drive after dark anymore."

"Okay. Yeah, I think he'll be interested to hear about your patient."

"Good. Thank you. I've got a question. I'm curious. How many of the people you interview for a meeting with JTB actually get to meet with him?"

He laughed loudly and choked while checking himself. Everyone in the room was now watching us. He signed to me I should wait a minute. When the lively conversation resumed, he leaned forward and said, "Nobody."

"Nobody?"

"Never. It's a matter of policy at these conventions. Well, that's not true—you're the first one. Personal supernatural experiences are real, but they are rare, very rare. All the people in this room are nerds or kooks."

"What am I?"

Not a nerd or kook. You're a…" He looked at me closely again. "You're a normal guy who wants to help people. And you…" He then gazed so long, it made me uncomfortable. "You've found a way to cope with your trauma."

"What are you?"

He laughed again, but this time kept it under control. He glanced sideways at a giant medieval warrior-princess making her case at the next-door interview table and said loudly enough for her to hear, "I'm an animal wrangler for the film industry—lions, tigers, bears. But between jobs, I help Jonathan for fun. You want my card? My name is Atlas."

He reached for his pocket while watching my face, which I'm sure was frowning with incredulity. Then he laughed and jabbed a finger at me. "Got you! I'm actually trained as a neurobiologist. Jonathan pulls me in on some of his cases."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense."

"So, here's his room number and phone, too, just in case," he said while scribbling on a napkin. "It will just be him. 5 PM."

I thanked him again and as I got up to leave, he said, "I've got a personal question. Umm. Can I borrow this manuscript? I'd like to read it. The writing's good. I'm intrigued already. Seems to be about… I just finished the book I'm reading."

"No."

As I rose to leave to find a place to wait, I thought I caught him saying, "Oh, my," while secretly glancing again at the giant warrior princess. After I left the conference room, a raucous roar erupted from the ballroom down the hall where JTB's broadcast was being held.

JTB was much younger than I expected—early twenties—but carried himself with a certain military bearing. His assistant had already filled him in on my patient's claims, and about the manuscripts. He offered no small talk or formal courtesy, but he was respectful. He asked lots of questions about the night world and was obviously disappointed with my lack of knowledge.

"The patient hasn't given me a detailed description of everything," I said, matter-of-factly, concealing my annoyance and embarrassment.

"That's okay. I understand. I'm just trying to find out the rules of the patient's world. How it all works. Its internal consistency and coherence. That kind of thing."

"Whatever for?"

"To help me tell if it's real or just in his head. It's possible he wrote the manuscripts and that would be solid. But the more logically it all fits together, in my experience, the more likely it's true. Reality imposes limitations, and everything within a strange world makes sense, even if we don't understand it, or it doesn't line up with our world. Imagination, fantasy, hallucination, or delusion, however, have no rules. Things often happen at random with no connection to the real." He paused a moment and then asked, "What do you think?"

"Well, the story is coherent. The patient is normal in every other way. He's extraordinarily calm. Though his nights are a prison and he wants to be free. The only time he lost his composure was when I told him I couldn't help him."

"Okay. That's good. Can I meet him? Will you, or more importantly, will he mind if I sit in on one of your sessions, and if it's appropriate, go to lunch or talk in an informal setting?"

"Despite his calm, I know he's desperate."

"Wouldn't you be? I mean a year alone, night after night?"

"Me?" I thought about how I'd feel, and nothing came to mind, so I said, "I don't know how to answer that question. I'd have to... I'd have to sleep on it."

JTB chuckled as he dialed a number on his phone. "You remind me of my assistant, Atlas. He's probably getting ready to party with some of the conferees, so it will take him a few minutes to get here. Before we conclude, I'd like to ask you a few personal questions, if I may."

He wanted to know all my background and social life and I gave them to him in a nutshell, but then he zeroed in on some particulars. "What do you do on the weekends?"

"I, I'm almost ashamed to say. I work on my tan. I sit in the sunshine at the park and watch people. It's enjoyable."

"Go out at night? Clubs, movies, concerts?"

"Never."

"Work out? Exercise? Gym membership?"

"My doctor says I'm in perfect health. I'll live to be 120. Must be in my genes."

"Vacations?"

"Not anymore. It might surprise you, but I really do enjoy being alive."

"Your social life seems to be limited to work. You know a great many people, and they like you and you like them, but they seem to be limited to your patients. You live alone. Have you experienced any trauma in personal relationships, or have you gone through some profound loss?"

"My wife Dawn passed away a year ago."

He put his hand to his forehead and with pain said, "Ohhh", slightly drawn out, as if he himself was suddenly feeling the loss. In the gentlest of voices, he asked, "How are you doing?"

"I don't know. There's emptiness. But in case you're wondering. I sleep like a baby."

He didn't chuckle this time. Maybe because at that moment, the electric lock clicked open on the hotel room door, and the assistant, Atlas, waltzed in wearing a tux. Literally waltzed, solo, and not in bad form considering his buzzed condition. I thought I glimpsed the medieval princess leaning on her sword

out in the hallway, an orchid pinned to her leather jerkin. She appeared smaller than before.

JTB was all business. "Take a note. Cancel my flight and all my appointments for the next three days. If I need more time here, we'll deal with that later."

The assistant merely said, "Yes, sir," set himself into position, and waltzed back out."

"Do it now!" JTB called out behind him. He got up to shut the door and said, "These conferences are odd, but they know how to dance in Portland. It's a formal with an orchestra."

"And a bar. Why do you speak at them?"

"The conventions are all about make-believe and having fun. I'm bringing reality."

"What was that loud roar I heard during your broadcast?" I asked.

"You wouldn't believe the strange things that happen whenever I'm live on the radio."

JTB acted very strangely at the therapy session. He didn't ask many questions and nothing new emerged. I thought the patient was especially patient with his hesitancy, and he too seemed more guarded than usual. I was discouraged with the experience, but JTB assured me he learned a lot just by observing and reading body language and facial expressions.

Furthermore, he said, the issues were becoming clearer and he intended to work on this to the best of his ability, no matter how much time it took, and he thought he now had a chance of unlocking the puzzle and helping the patient. I was skeptical,

of course, but set that aside. I had a free hour, and after the session, I gave him copies of more of the patient's sleep journal pages, and then we, the three of us, walked straight over to Shaishnikof's donut shop, which was only a few blocks away from my office. The patient said he didn't care for any today, but JTB and I both indulged ourselves.

"This is the best donut shop in the Northwest," I told them.

"I think it would be safe to agree with you," JTB said through a full mouth of an éclair, which he washed down with full-fat milk mixed with a little coffee.

The patient said, "I love this place, but I've already consumed my quota for the day. I come here every morning, at least I do in the wintertime."

"I call them my Vitamin D," I said. "The letter 'D' for donut."

JTB and the patient laughed, but only politely. Their hearts weren't into the joke.

"When did you first start coming here?" the patient asked.

"That's a funny story. It was just after Dawn, my wife passed, and I simply woke up here early one morning. I could only conclude that I had been sleepwalking because of the new vacancy in my life, and I went where I could find comfort. I hadn't even known about the place before, and I had found it with my subconscious. It was alarming, but I thought, what the heck, and ordered a half-dozen of my favorites—chocolate icing on chocolate cake donuts—and ate them all throughout the day. I now come at least once a week."

"Did you ever experience any more sleepwalking episodes?" JTB asked.

"No, that was the first and the last. But here's another joke. What's the difference between sleepwalking and walksleeping?"

Neither of my companions ventured a guess.

Mr. Shaishnikof, the owner of the donut shop, chose this unfortunate moment to approach and interrupt. "I recognize you, Mr. Jonathan Barron. Your poster with a picture is taped to my window right over there. I need to tell you something." He looked around to be sure no other customers were nearby, leaned forward, and whispered, "My shop is haunted."

"Really, sir?" I said. "We were talking, you know."

"That's okay," JTB said patiently. "Tell me more about the ghost."

"Every morning, we arrive at 4 am to bake, because we open so early. Every morning, my daughter fills the glass cases with new donuts and pastries. And every morning, some of them disappear into thin air from the cases. Every morning we are open, this happens."

"Sounds like one of your employees is embezzling," I offered.

"Embezzling donuts? No, no. I haven't told you the whole mystery yet. Every morning, the ghost leaves money to pay for them. And a $5 tip in the jar!"

"Isn't that what donuts always do?" I said. "Disappear?"

"Hey," JTB said, "Tell you what. I'm busy now, but I'll come back later. Let's talk more then."

"I'm free at 3 pm," Shaishnikof said. "Don't tell anyone about this. I don't want to scare away my customers."

After he left, I said to my companions, "I'd think customers might be attracted by a haunted donut shop. Here's the difference: sleepwalking is when you *sleep* while you walk. But walksleeping is when you *walk* while you sleep."

Both of them chuckled.

"You see the difference, right? Shall I explain?"

"No!"

And, "Spare us, please!"

"Then what's the difference between talking while you sleep and sleeping while you talk?"

They both groaned, and I said, "It's not what you think. More people than you'd believe talk in their sleep, but only preachers and politicians sleep while they talk."

Our afternoon ended thus on a light note, and JTB promised he'd get back to me in the morning on the following day.

4.
The Patient

Composed on the following night and immediately delivered to JTB.

Dear Mr. Barron,

You haven't known it, but I've met you. My name is Ronald Fjermestad. This is true. And I'm the Patient. Dr. Fjermestad of Camas and I have the same surname; in fact, we have the same name exactly, first, middle, and last. The reason is, we are the same person.

I'm writing to you because there's no other way to communicate. Over the years, I've figured out how to be in

touch directly with people of the day world. It's complicated, but I've hired a delivery service—several delivery services—and at sunrise, everything is set into motion. I can't wait for regular mail because it's so slow. I mean, if it takes three days for a letter to arrive, that's three years for me.

When you came to Dr. Fjermestad's office for my therapy session, I know what you saw and heard. He was talking to the air, and the air never replied. I have to say that I write about him as if he is a separate being, only out of convenience. What's really happening is the day part of me has shut out the night part, the part that lives through the eternal nights. There's a reason for this. He can't live with the darkness. We, or more accurately, *I* can't live with it. I'm sure this sounds confusing. What I'm certain is, if the part of me who is in control during the day finds out about the nights eternal, I will die. That's why I can't tell myself. That's why I'm trapped. I was pleased that you didn't reveal to me that I was merely talking to myself. I'm certain you knew something was wrong and it was better to try to take some time to figure it out. For one thing, I probably wouldn't have believed you, and I might have gotten angry and called you a crackpot.

Another thing. I think you noticed that when Dawn's death comes up, I freeze for a short time. Something in me locks down. I even stop breathing. Then it passes and I don't even know it happened.

I have a night house within walking distance from my day house and office.

What happens for me is, at local sunset, everything slows down; it actually happens gradually over a few minutes, but the block raises and I shift to the long night immediately. Usually I walk to my night house and in the days of twilight I enjoy what's left of the light in the sky. That house is then my base for the next year. This isn't the place to explain how

everything works, but in a long year of night, a lot of things change. It's necessary to maintain a separate living space where I can relax and not worry about returning everything to what it was, so the daytime Dr. Fjermestad doesn't suspect anything. When daylight is returning, I just walk back to the other house, climb into bed or wherever the previous sunset caught me, and wait. When the sun rises, I fade into the background. I don't know what's worse, the everlasting night, or a day in which I'm a helpless passenger in my own mind. Again, we are one person. I am he and he is me.

I've enclosed a key to my night house and written the address at the bottom here. You are welcome to visit and see what it's like. It's nice. It's big and private. The windows are shuttered because I keep the lights blazing during my waking periods, and I learned ages ago that the neighbors worry if they see them flipping off and on all night long. If you come in the morning, you will find the garage full of shipping boxes all ready to go out. If you arrive in the evening, the garage will be full of supplies for the next year. If you come at night, you won't see me, and in fact, I think you'll see stuff suddenly appearing and disappearing. I'll see you and be careful not to bump into you. Please don't stay long, because even half an hour will be a couple weeks for me, and if I'm home, you will be in my way.

You have my sleep journal entries from the daytime Dr. Fjermestad. They will be helpful to you in getting an idea of what's happening, but what I share with myself is carefully guarded and selective. I wish you and I could talk face-to-face, but I don't know how this would be possible.

I've had a lot of time to think about it, and there's one thing that might be relevant. The closer a thing is to me physically, the more it enters my own world and pace of time. If it's raining, raindrops are frozen in the air, but as they get closer to me, they begin to behave normally and come into contact with

my skin and clothing, and then I'll be wet for a while until it turns into water vapor.

You might think if I embraced you, you might enter the night world. But as I believe I've written before (it was so long ago), if I touch a person, they will burn. Perhaps because living flesh is more delicate than non-living materials. I can't explain these oddities and seeming inconsistencies. I can only describe them. So, a long hug would be highly awkward to maintain even if it works, and there's a risk you would be severely burned.

If you've had a chance to look at any of my books, a fair number of them are in the horror genre. Vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and on and on. I'm a creature of the night. As any writer knows, I'm an entity to inspire stories. I move invisibly, I haunt houses; I make blood boil, I run with the creatures of darkness. I live forever and never grow old.

I don't propose any solutions. I've thought about this for centuries. But I don't know of another person in the world better than you who could figure this out. There's a Romanian Orthodox priest I'm corresponding with who might help, but he's so far away. One more thing. Please, do not waste any time, I beg you. I cope, but despair is always calling at my door. I've enclosed here a check. $800,000. I've made a great deal of money from my books. (And not from robbing banks, which is all too easy.) So, hopefully, this will help you. And there's more money available. I'm not in any position to negotiate a fee.

So you will know, when I first went to the donut shop, I made the mistake of staying after sunrise, and my daytime self woke into consciousness with a donut in my hand and my mouth open. Fortunately, no one noticed me. So, I'm the ghost of the shop. I'm sure Mr. Shaishnikof is upset, and he's not the only person in town who has weird things happening. I'm

afraid it can't be helped.

One last thing. The remarkably pleasant medieval girl whom your assistant, Atlas, met at the convention? Her name is Windfriede. Chaucerian English is just one of the dozens of languages I've learned to read, and I understood what she was saying while we were waiting in line and during the "interview." Since then, I've even found historical accounts of her being taken. She's genuine. She was abducted from 12th-century Britain by aliens. They kept her in the darkness of outer space for biometric measurements (not her words) and then carelessly deposited her in our century outside the convention's hotel. She couldn't be easily understood by the conventioneers, but they guided her to your interview line. She hadn't been here more than an hour.

Oh, yeah. A warning. She's a virgin and intends to remain so until a proper marriage, and she's not averse to killing anyone who presumes otherwise. But I suppose your Atlas has discovered that already, or he soon will.

5.
Therapist
Begins and ends early the following morning.

JTB did call me early the next morning in a hurry, and he had but one thing to say, or ask.

"What's your blood type?"

"Don't tell me you think there's something to the patient's vampire paranoia?"

"No. That's not it. I'm not sure if this will work, but I have an idea and I'm just leaving no stone unturned. I may not see you for a while, but don't worry. I'm working on the case. I've

been in contact with the patient and he's willing to talk with me directly, so I'll let him keep you updated, if he wishes."

I told him my blood type. A+ It's common, but with limitations as to who is compatible.

"Thanks. One last question for now. Have you had any blood work done in the last couple years?"

"No, how would that help? I'm not following you. I'm not the patient."

"You're probably right. We might not need those details."

JTB hung up without saying farewell, and I thought, "He's a quirky bird. He's hiding something, but I expect he knows what he's doing."

6.
The Patient
The following night: speculations and firsthand accounts.

Jonathan came by the house just after sunset a while ago and left a letter. I've been staying close to home in case of news of a breakthrough. It was exciting to have a visitor, even a frozen one. He was here two days. I had plenty of time to study him, though after a while, I lost interest.

His letter, however…

He proposed that I draw two pints of blood over two of my months and keep them in the refrigerator for him to pick up later in the same normal night, and he explained why.

As a prolific, rampant storyteller, scripts run through my head continuously. Dialog between characters and plot points flow along naturally with no effort and unbidden. Often, all I have

to do is write them down. These stories have kept me alive over the centuries as a substitute for real life. This is much like what's in the mind of a psychotic person, except I know the difference between what is real and the imaginary, if you exclude a few occasions when I lost myself in the story. Which is yet another danger of the night.

All that to say, I can easily imagine how he presented his idea to his team in the morning after my letter to him arrived by special courier.

Bed and Breakfast in Camas. An old six-sided church remodeled. A development company did the work and gave it to the city, who leased it to a family. Jonathan has received my letter and just called the Therapist to get his blood type.

"Thanks for getting up early," Jonathan says as he looks around the sleepy table in the vaulted former sanctuary. He yawns big. [Describe the space. Stained glass windows, etc. Everyone is staying at the B&B.] "We need to move quickly."

Jonathan wonders if his convention helpers were right for this job. He usually worked alone, so, do these people—the three part-time kook interviewers and his full-time radio producer/media guy—Motty—have what it takes for deep analysis and adventure? Atlas seems to be the only person with physical courage.

The retired college professor Jonathan hired to translate for the medieval princess has taken a fatherly role of her emotional guardian, which is nice. She's having a hard time adjusting and misses her people and home. Jonathan will begin with her case as soon as he reaches a resolution of the sleep therapist.

A cook is on site. Sunshine pours into the windows. Someone moves to close the curtains. Someone else says leave them

open. People scoot around so it's not in their eyes.

"Okay," Jonathan says. "Breakfast will be ready soon, and coffee, so have a heart. Here's my idea: The patient wrote to me about how objects and processes catch up to his pace as they come close to him. Early this morning, I received a letter from the patient, and it gave me an idea. What better way to be near him than to have his blood infused into a person's circulatory system?"

"Why do we need to be near him?" Atlas asks.

"So we can talk, dunderhead," Motty says.

"Yes, we need to not only talk directly and in real time to arrange further treatments, but we need to understand this night world for ourselves."

"What are the risks?" Motty asks.

"Unknown," Jonathan says. "The accelerated blood might kill you. Or might entail no risk other than lost time. However," Jonathan adds with enthusiasm, "the chance to explore this unknown phenomenon is inspirational!"

"Is a blood transfusion the only way to be close?" Atlas says. "I can think of another." He says this while looking at Windfriede, who when the professor translated, stands up and punches Atlas in the face. Holding his now bleeding nose, he trots to the bathroom.

"Well," Jonathan says, chuckling and scanning the body language around the circle. "Everyone's awake now. Skin-to-skin proximity might put you into his world, but for a complex living entity, the adjustment happens too slowly. The visitor would suffer extensive burns and likely wouldn't survive."

"What about just sitting next to him, not touching, and entering his world slowly," the professor asks.

"Good idea. Let's try that.

(They wouldn't know I already did try it at a restaurant for a couple days with a lovely lady just a little younger than me. It was kind of a date, though she was unaware of my presence. She would speed up a little and be confused, but I couldn't hold still long enough. And every time I got up for a break, she fell back into normal time.)

"Meanwhile, I want to push on with the more aggressive approach," Jonathan continues. "If you don't know your blood group, find out immediately. Motty has arranged for a phlebotomist to come here and test you all. If you want to confirm your group, do the test. We don't want anyone to die. She'll be here in an hour. She'll expedite the tests, so we will have results quickly. Dr. Fjermestad is A+. Anyone here with A+ or AB+?"

Just then, Atlas comes in, pinching his nose.

"Did you find out your blood group?" The professor asks and everyone laughs.

"It's red. Very, very red."

No one in the room knows if they had the required blood type.

Breakfast arrives and the meeting comes to a close.

The phleb arrives early—Christy, she loves cloak and dagger stuff—so, they are sticking people and drawing blood in a bedroom while everyone else chows down at the table or on the balcony. Bacon, eggs, toast, orange juice, fried potatoes, biscuits and gravy. Fried chicken and coleslaw, plus gallons of

coffee with creamer. Beans and rice burritos for the vegans, and best of all, fresh donuts brought in directly from Shaishnikof's shop.

Windfriede is curious and when she finally understands, doesn't want to be left out, so she does a blood draw, too.

Next: Blood results are back later in the day. The team is all there waiting. No one but Atlas is a match, but he says he won't go alone.

Jonathan suggests he himself go with Atlas, even though he's not a match. Everyone else says he can't. Too dangerous.

They propose finding someone else. No time. Last resort is the patient tests people during the night world and picks a likely person, someone close to him. Not test many of them, just enough, but they all agree it's a bad idea, since it's a violation of their personal integrity, and might not work anyway, let alone being a huge shock to them if it does work.

Christy draws a few mLs from a small vial of the patient's blood and tests touching it to Atlas's arm to see if it raises a blister. It doesn't. But other than him, they still don't have any matches. Everyone is at a loss.

The professor seems to look up from scratching around in his brain for another successful joke and says with reluctance, he is AB+ and that Windfriede is A+.

"Why didn't you tell us earlier?" Jonathan asks.

"I was protecting Windfriede," the professor said. "I asked Christy to help me keep the secret."

Windfriede wants to go and is ready now, she says. She's firm. Refuses to let Atlas go, but asks the professor to

accompany her. He agrees, because she is dear to him.

The two of them arrive at my night house. Jonathan leaves his letter to me on the table, and it vanishes immediately. Now they wait for my blood to appear. A medical refrigerator poofs into existence out of nowhere. Motty keeps checking inside. The atmosphere is tense. Everyone is spooked, knowing that I'm watching and moving around them invisibly at lightning speed. They think they can feel my presence, especially Atlas. At last, the blood is there, more than they expected, and they perform the transfusion. Windfriede blurs for a moment, then vanishes from normal time and emerges into Long Night time.

I break into tears.

⧗

That was me making this up, remember? It's not fully written and polished, but you get the gist. I did break down into tears, and Windfriede and the professor gave me some details. Except for what I personally saw, which I tell below, I imagined the rest happening that way, and maybe it did.

But what followed is what matters most…

This is what transpired: Jonathan had written he needed two pints of blood, one for each visitor. I borrowed a medical refrigerator and studied up on drawing and preserving whole blood. The right temperature, the right anticoagulant, the tests for contagious diseases, etc., how to recover from giving blood, and I left them a half-dozen pints.

With the assistance of Christy, the phlebotomist, who had had experience as a paramedic, they performed the transfusions here in my house after sunset soon after I arrived. Windfriede woke up first and a few hours later, the professor. Because she had already gone through the experience of going to sleep and waking up eight centuries later in another part of the

world and where almost no one spoke her language, entering an endless night was not so strange to her as it was to the professor, who, adding to the novelty, experienced symptoms from receiving too much infused blood too fast.

Windfriede and I talked quietly in Middle English mixed with some Latin (a surprise to me that she knew any) until the professor arrived an hour later, and once we had him shipshape again—he had suffered some mild edema—we got down to the business of working up a plan.

A starting point was based on my informal work on Compensatory Healing, which is—oversimplified—providing multiple overwhelming, affirming, ongoing experiences to offset a single, opposite, destructive one, even one horrific. As in our case, if a patient has suffered from debilitating trauma originating from or in darkness, then exposure to prolonged, continuous sunlight would be a treatment. But I don't wish to belabor explaining what we decided. Describing what we eventually did will be far more interesting.

After we perfected our plan and I made what arrangements I could for my part to spring into action at sunrise, we just waited, not knowing how long the blood would be effective to keep them with me. We debated giving them more blood, but decided they needed to return to normal time as soon as possible to start everything into motion—plus they needed to brainstorm about its possible efficacy with Jonathan and the others, and make adjustments.

We did write back and forth with Jonathan, but it was painstakingly slow. I'd write a note, which would become visible to him and the team instantly, but his reading the note and replying took days and days for us.

While we waited, I gave them Windfriede and the professor tours of Camas, and I explained all I had learned about its

history and politics. It was rather exhaustive, beginning with known and supposed prehistory. It's not possible to explain to any mortal how fulfilling my simple, platonic relationship with Windfriede was after my ever-so-long periodic isolation. We were both lonesome, and we had so much in common.

In short, I proposed marriage and she accepted.

The professor was startled and warned of the dangers, that I may never be integrated, and our married life together would be so tenuous. But he also saw our needs and that we were perfect for each other. He agreed to perform the ceremony, which Windfriede said must be in the Latin liturgy. I happened to have borrowed a copy from the local Catholic parish office a few decades or so ago. We needed witnesses, and the best we could do was perform the ceremony during the early, early morning Easter Vigil, when the church was half full of people, frozen people, but I imagine they were aware that something beyond the ordinary world happened in their midst. And it probably made no difference, but the bride was named after a saint who was said to have powers of healing.

Our hour in the church sanctuary would have lasted five seconds to them, as I show below.

12 hours Typical Time = 8,760 hours (one year) of Long Night
Divide both sides by 12.
One hour of Typical Time = 730 hours of Long Night.
Divide both sides by 730.
0.00136986 hour Typical Time = One hour of Long Night.
Multiply 0.00136986 x 3600 (one hour) to get seconds

4.931496 seconds.

This is only an estimate, because the 1 to 730 ratio only applies during the local equinox and does not account for a year being 365.25 days and the daily changes in sunrises and sunsets depending on latitude.

After a week of our wedded heaven, at which time the professor did his own writing and left us alone, he slowed down into motionlessness.

Windfriede and I knew her departure would shortly follow. As she felt it approaching, she asked, "Will you be content alone?"

"No, not content; but you know I'll be fine. And I'll see you tomorrow night."

It was both unbearably painful and joyous to see them frozen in my night home.

Windfriede is gone, and I'm elated to have had real company, to know and love a person more than anything in the world, in the whole universe. But now, I'm more desolate than ever, back to surviving on my own. Having Windfriede here, and her guardian (effectively her adopted father), made me dependent, made me aware of what I'm missing. Then again, I have hope. We shall see how I react during the day. Maybe there will be a change, a softening, a vulnerability. And then, also, she hopes to return to me in a year.

Months later, as sunrays from below the horizon began to color the clouds and the mountain in the east, I stopped by the donut shop and speed-walked to my day house to arrive a few moments before sunrise.

7.
Therapist

I put the following record into the patient's file:

JTB had made himself scarce for a week, but he and his people were still in town, so it didn't surprise me when he

called on Thursday and asked if he could stop by soon to give me an update. I said we could meet at the park on Saturday. We took one of the picnic tables in the shade of a stand of enormous Douglas Fir trees near the swimming pool.

He brought a small cooler of minty iced tea and glasses.

After the usual greetings, he leaned forward and said, "But how are you, really?"

"Now that I think about it… I thought I was perfect until you asked. Now I'm worried."

"What's up, then?"

"Why the interest? I don't understand. I thought you were going to tell me what you're finding from the patient."

"All right, let's start there. Umm. Members of my team have spent a lot of time with him this past week, and we wonder if there's a prior relationship between you and him. He said you were the only person who could help him."

"That's what he said, yes."

"Do you have any idea why?"

I closed my eyes because there was only one thing that came to mind, and it was too painful to think about. I hadn't thought about this for months. I took a deep breath. "It might be… It might be that he knew Dawn. Was he a colleague of hers? An old boyfriend she never told me about? It might be that he had some connection to her death."

"How did she die? You never said."

At that point, I only felt one thing: A jumbled mixture of

horror, shame, sadness, and guilt so deep and with no redemption. When at last I could speak, when I could trust my voice, I took a deep breath. “She took her own life.”

And then in the same soft voice he used before when I first mentioned her, he asked, “How, how did she take her life?”

All the emotions swept over me again. “She overdosed on sleeping pills I gave her.”

“Ohhh.” A long, long pause, then, “Did you find her?”

“No… I don’t remember... Maybe the patient found her. I don’t know. Maybe they were having an affair. It was a very dark time for me. I don’t know.”

This subject came to a close and we sat there at the table for a long time, neither of us speaking. We could hear happy voices of children playing at the pool, the flap and staccato bouncing of the diving boards. Tennis rackets pinging a ball back and forth. The fragrant. clean smell of fir needles roasting in the sunshine mingled with sulfur from the papermill. Fair weather clouds sailing inland from the nearby Pacific Ocean.

I broke the conversational silence. “Well, I’ve gotten over her death. But I don’t think you ever get over it. Not completely. Have you ever thought about becoming a therapist?”

“Not really. Maybe someday. Yeah, I’ll ask the patient about your wife. It could be the passcode for helping him.” And this seemed to put the subject to rest.

“You know, it’s funny,” I said.

“What?”

“I sleep soundly. It’s almost scary. I don’t get up for the

bathroom. If I dream, I usually can't remember the details or any storyline—just vague feelings, but the last few days, my dreams are vivid, colorful, and shall I say, vaguely erotic."

"Oh?"

"You'd think it'd be Dawn, but it's… you're going to think I'm a perv… But it's your crazy medieval princess who can't speak English."

"She's an attractive woman."

"Not to me. Not my type. That's why it doesn't make sense. I only saw her at your convention." I then changed the subject. "The patient is coming in on Monday. Maybe we'll have a heart-to-heart about Dawn. I think I'm ready to talk about her now. There may be something related to her, and I can offer him specific ideas that helped me deal with grief. There's no point anymore in being jealous."

Soon after that meeting with JTB, the patient came in for his scheduled appointment, but he only stayed a few minutes, so I didn't have a chance to ask about Dawn.

"Jonathan and his friends have proposed a plan for treating my Eternal Night Disorder," he said, "and I'm hopeful it will work. At the very least, it will give me a reprieve for a few months at a time, which might not seem much, but for me it means nearly 100 years."

"That's good news," I said noncommittally, still not believing any of this could be possible.

"We've already made incredible progress in allowing me to communicate in person with other people during the night."

It entered my mind to ask if he bit people on the neck, but we've exhausted our patience with our vampire references. So, I merely nodded.

He continued. "I know you've dedicated your life to helping people sleep, and it's so important to everyone. We're planning to apply your Compensatory Healing ideas in unconventional ways. But I can't tell you more right now. My condition may be unique in human history, but I think not. So, after we try our plan and if it helps, we'll share what we learn with you. And you'll be the first person to know."

"That's kind of you."

"You've played an essential role all along."

"I only listened, and when I reached my limitations, I found someone who could take things from there."

"Anyway, thank you. This is farewell for now."

I didn't know what to say. Patients leaving my practice for whatever reason was always painful to me. I thought I should shake his hand, or maybe even give him a hug, but by the time I stood up to walk him outside into the sunshine, he was gone. I had a feeling I'd never see him again.

Life is full, and so in the next few weeks, my sadness in losing a patient who had become a friend faded. It always does. I have a waiting list, so that spot filled quickly and I had a new human puzzle to solve.

One day, my offsite secretary, Diana my mother-in-law, called me on the phone, as she does at least once a day, whether she needs to or not, so it is ordinary. But this time she was excited, which was extraordinary.

"I forgot to tell you because I thought it was a hoax," she said, breathlessly, "but last Tuesday I received a call from a guy with an accent who said you had won a prize, and a letter would arrive special delivery that would give all the details. He was pleased with himself, like it was a big deal, and said that you'd be happy. But too good to be true, right?"

"What was the prize for? Did he say?"

"Something about endless, eternal, compensation. I wasn't listening at that point. I just wanted to get him off the line."

"Sounds like you took the right approach. Now, what was it you called me about?"

"Just wait, I'm getting there. A letter came today. Hand delivered. A fancy black Volvo. He asked to see my ID. The letter said you'd been awarded a special international prize in medicine. Oslo? There's a check. I'm looking at it again now. No, that amount can't be right. Nope. Too many zeros."

⧗

When I arrived by limo at Portland International on the morning of June 2nd, at the fancy private air service center east of the main terminals, I met a cluster of smiling, happy faces, many of whom I recognized: JTB, Atlas, Diane, and two of JTB's other assistants whose names I can never remember. Christy, Shaishnikof and his daughter, and even the mayor of Camas and his wife.

JTB introduced me to those I didn't know: Motty—his radio producer—Christy, and a retired professor of classical languages. And lastly, the medieval maiden, who squeezed me so tight I couldn't breathe. All I could do was smile at everyone, hug back, shake hands, and endeavor to keep myself from crying.

JTB said, “This is my team. We’re going with you.”

“The prize letter informed me as much. Unconventional application of my ideas.”

“We’re still working on your case.”

I sighed. “The case that says I don’t deserve the prize. Your entourage is an absurd condition, but it’s worth it to me. It’ll be fun,” I said, and I meant it sincerely. I looked around. “The patient should be here, too.”

“I’m hoping he’ll join us in Norway.”

We departed Portland for Oslo at about 7:55 am. The International Academy for Sleep Medicine had furnished a private long-range jet for the flight. JTB had made some arrangement, so that we would fly west to pick up some of his paranormal investigator friends. I think they were to look into Norwegian revenants, or some such thing. The flight with three stops (when we refueled) took twice as long as it would have if we flew direct, but since I hadn’t gone far from home for a long time, nor had any vacation for three years, it was delightful. The captain acted as a world geography guide and frequently gave information over one of the onboard radio channels about the natural features and countries we could see from the windows.

The fellow passengers were good company and the time passed quickly.

The professor was teaching the medieval princess chess, and that started up a speed tournament, which was won by Shaishnikof, who said his grandfather taught him.

The princess kept glancing at me from time to time, and although she couldn’t possibly be aware of my dreams, it was

uncomfortable, especially because she looked like she might actually know, and thought they were nice. Oh dear.

She once came alone and sat next to me. She still clung to her dialect, but I was able to understand most of what she said. "The professor told me you are to give a speech."

"Yes, I'm talking about lines from a play called Macbeth."

"A king in the north."

"The play is macabre and historically inaccurate, but it contains beautiful poetic verses."

"And what are they?"

I recited them from memory:

"Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast."

She thought awhile, perhaps contemplating the metaphors. "Say them again."

I did, and she said tenderly, "I've heard these truths before now. I just wanted to hear you say them now with your voice." And then she got up and moved to a reclining seat by herself, slipped on noise reduction earmuffs, and composed herself for sleep. I brought her a blanket, which she gratefully, wordlessly welcomed.

Atlas later organized a game of charades and kept up a ridiculous banter of spontaneous jokes. During one of his impromptu monologues, JTB was reading a sci-fi fan periodical in the back. I sat down next to him.

"It's hard to believe he's a neurobiologist."

He looked up from his magazine with a bemused expression. "He told you that?"

"After he said he was an animal wrangler."

"Hard to know for sure what he did in his past life. He told me he was a psychic. All I care about is, he passed a background check, he contributes to our work, and he's loyal."

"I think he was a standup comic," I said, but JTB had already returned to his magazine. I returned to staring from my window and napping.

The newcomers, a man and a woman whom we picked up at separate stops, kept to themselves and each other, apparently having a lot of catching up to do.

We arrived at the spectacular Oslo Gardermoen Airport at about 2 in the afternoon, which, because we raced the sun and crossed the International Date Line, was officially the second day after we left. A Norwegian official had pre-cleared us in Portland, and we were able to bypass customs.

"Okay everyone!" a lovely female voice in a dapper uniform said louder than you'd expect from such a lithe figure, "The ceremony is in four hours, so we must be moving."

Our personal guide.

With bustling, noise, and exited voices, we wound through the gathered clusters of arriving and departing passengers to the parking area and mounted the steps into a long luxury van, of the kind with more window space on the outside than anything else. The air service had brought our luggage to us, and so after the driver tossed the final bags into the underbins and

strapped himself in, we glided underway.

JTB made sure I had a window seat and he plopped into the aisle seat next to me to fill me in on the details, which I could scarcely absorb. No problem, I'd just take everything as it came.

"Do you have your speech?" JTB asked.

"Huh? Yes, of course." I patted my pocket for the thousandth time to make sure.

JTB must have noticed how overwhelmed and distracted I was, and fell silent. For the remainder of the drive, my eyes and heart feasted on the sharp, bright architectural lines of Oslo, the intense, festive colors of the homes, and the charming landscape of the countryside as we drove toward the neighboring city where the ceremony was to be held.

The ceremony, the speeches—my speech—the formal outfits, the stiff pageantry, and stately music, the praise, none of it terribly significant in the huge picture of life. All of it exciting and important in the moment, but soon over, and with relief, we returned to the mundane, though Norway was anything but mundane for me.

Back at our hotel, which must have been a royal Nordic palace not very long ago, I waved to all our friends who had gathered around a cheery fireplace, and I hurried toward my room to turn in early as usual. JTB caught me at the bottom of the staircase and said, "We have some more surprises in store."

"As the prize stipulated," I said hurriedly, "I was to conduct interviews with people living for long periods in atypical sunrise and sunset conditions."

"Tomorrow we leave for Hammerfest, a small town way up in

the north."

"That's great. We never went when I was a child, but I've always wanted to visit."

As I trotted up the stairs, I almost laughed, thinking of myself as a type of Cinderella. If I didn't leave the ball before the clock struck twelve, I'd turn into a pumpkin. It was a ludicrous thought. But after I once blanked out after dark at the bowling alley and woke up at home in the morning with no memory of what had happened, I decided it wouldn't ever happen again.

A soft knock on the door. I barely heard it, and then it came again. I jumped out of bed. Who could this be? Why didn't they just call me?

It was the medieval princess in a blue bathrobe.

I was remembering that vampires couldn't enter your dwelling unless invited, but she wasn't a vampire and just walked straight in carrying an insulated lunch box, and a quilted duffle bag, and asked me to make tea, and then she plopped down in one of the two portola chairs.

This was awkward. My only option as a gentleman who was reluctant to give offense was to grab my clothes and wordlessly leave the room, but if she wasn't a vampire, I apparently am no gentleman. Because when she finished her tea and I in the other portola chair was still sipping mine, she put down her cup, walked over, and climbed into my lap…

And I didn't object.

"It's okay," she said. "I promise. You're ever my only man."

8.
The Patient

Windfriede had fallen asleep in my room before sunset, which took place about 10:30 pm local time. And though she had brought some of my chilled blood so she could join me, it would be a while, a day or two of waiting. From time to time I looked in at the whole process happening in ultraslow motion.

I also expected more of Jonathan's A+ and AB+ friends to join us for a while. They and the guys we picked up on the flight to Norway would be documenting as much of the Long Night world as possible in the limited time they had before their transfusions wore off.

Since an unavoidable night intervened before we could head north for the final step of treatment, Windfriede and I had planned for this, a night holiday in the south and midlands of Norway, and we had made all kinds of arrangements in advance. Bikes for the towns and paved trails, kayaks for the fiords, nice hostels, hiking on the 100s of miles of trails in the mountains, and then the return trip to the hotel before sunrise. At that latitude in June, the nights are short, so we expected our outing to last much less than a year. We'd be doing direct transfusions during the night so she could extend her stay.

9.
Therapist

The princess was still sleeping in the king-size bed when I woke early. I didn't remember much except a bit of confusion between what was dream and what was real.

Nevertheless, I felt more relaxed and rested than ever before in my life. It was like in my younger days when Dawn and I

would hike for miles and miles all day and lie in bed in extravagant laziness the next morning, hearts beating slow and steady, stretching our strong stiff legs and humming in pleasure with an easy conscience that we'd done all the strenuous physical work necessary for the remainder of our lives, or so it felt. I hadn't walked all those miles, of course, but I had the same feelings of a well-earned contentment.

We arrived at the coastal town of Hammerfest, 1870 kilometers north of Oslo, by evening. It's a lovely place, framed by water and rock. I wanted to turn in early, and with the princess here with me, I had more reason than ever to stick to custom, but she brought the professor (her translator) with her into my room, and said she wanted to stay up late and talk.

"What about?" I asked.

"I have some things to tell you."

I suddenly felt guilty. I had always felt that she was a crazy person who had play-acted being from the 12th Century so much that she believed it herself, and in selfishness, I had pretended this didn't matter. And I was taking advantage of her. "Now the truth comes out," I said in my shame.

"Yes, the truth. Tonight it is safe to tell you because the sun will not set."

"What?"

"We have reserved a patio."

She led me by the hand up the stairs to the rooftop that was decorated with tiny lights and afforded a full view of the sky, a calm, dramatic sky with an orange-red sun near the southwestern horizon. The three of us took seats around a

woven metal table.

Then she said—the prof translating from Middle English—the most shocking thing I have ever heard in my entire life: "You and your patient, the one who lives a year every night, you are the same person. You are him and he is you."

She paused to let me process. Uncomprehending, I could say nothing, and she continued:

"You are one person. Part of you has blocked knowledge of the other part. You see the other part of you as the patient, but you are the real patient of your story. You have lived alone through endless years of night."

I stopped breathing.

Windfriede gently shook me by the shoulders, and I took a deep breath. And about the same moment, the impenetrable wall within me vanished, and I knew what she said was true.

I had pushed my fear and despair where they could not hurt anymore, and they became embodied into the Long Night. You might think this news would overthrow me. That I would cry, or pass out, or scoff. I thought for centuries that revealing the truth to myself would kill me. The truth indeed might have destroyed me up until a few weeks ago when Windfriede entered my life, filling the endless darkness of my soul with love and companionship, and warm closeness.

I walked over to the balustrade and gazed off to the sunset that would last until sunrise, both of them merging, blending, into an endless day, a seamless day and a restoration of my life. In the centuries of aloneness and suffering, I had developed a resignation during the Long Night that what was essential to my person could never be killed, and now the resignation bore fruit. My struggle against annihilation perfected and endlessly

re-perfected, I was now free.

"I am so relieved it's over."

Windfriede put her arms around me as we stood together side-by-side, gazing at the sky.

"You really are a medieval princess. I know."

"That I am."

"We both have lived apart from the world we see before us. We are a perfect match. I said that before."

"You have said it many times."

"I remember."

The professor had remained at the table, his language fluency no longer needed. But he said, "We have company."

JTB rushed up at the head of the pack, excited, as usual, taking in the scene. "It worked, or it's working! We don't know if the barrier is down permanently, but we have months of 24-hour sun days left. After that, we'll see. If we need to, we can ship you off to Antarctica or follow the sun in a supersonic jet for a few months. But I think we've ended your endless night.

"I hope so," I said. "I never want to go back."

10.
Ron Fjermestad

Diane, Christy, and the Shaishnikofs returned to Camas. After about a week luxuriating in Hammerfest, when it rained much of the time, the rest of us sailed the ferry way up north

to the town of Longyearbyen in the Svalbard archipelago, midway between the northern coast of the mainland and the North Pole. A glorious four-day voyage. Visiting this place, where long ago my older brother and the other children tormented me with stories of Nordic monsters during the sunless polar winters, Jonathan said, would be a further and hopefully final step in my "cure." From here, JTB also planned to tell our story live on his radio program, which at this early stage of his career, only came out once a month.

While Motty and Atlas took a day to set up the school gymnasium for the broadcast. (We felt that half the town would be attending.) Windfriede and I hired a boat to carry us out to an abandoned Soviet coal mining village—virtually a ghost town of the size and appearance of a medium-sized community college in the US, but with no students or trees whatsoever. After lunch at the incongruous hotel's Russian restaurant, we wandered around the barren campus and looked into the apartments and other interior spaces, which appeared as if abandoned the day before, everything left exactly where it was when people lived there. At the kindergarten barracks, Windfriede gazed around at the blocky wooden toys scattered over the floor and said, "Maybe aliens took them all."

Her tears said she wasn't joking.

"My parents brought us here to this place once, before the mine closed," I said. "In the dead of winter. We stayed at the hotel. This is where my nightmares began. The dreams of a relentless, ravenous beast that pursued me even into sleep during my Long Nights."

The Broadcast/Ron Fjermestad

Jonathan gave me a transcript, and I've included it below, edited and with a few added comments of my own. I've taken

out questions and answers about subjects I've covered before.

MOTTY: Okay, everyone. We need it quiet in the gym. Only babies are excused to make noise! Are you a baby, sir, leaning against the wall? Well, then. We are live. Thank you, all. We are rolling tape, right, Atlas? Tonight, our host, paranormal investigator Jonathan T. Barron, will be interviewing Dr. Ronald Fjermestad from a small town along the Columbia River in the USA. In the front row here is his wife, Windfriede, and a few of their friends.

After the enthusiastic applause, Jonathan gave my history and asked me to explain and describe the everlasting night world, and how I came to escape.

The audience listened with rapt attention, the year-round residents knowing from experience what the long polar nights are like and how they had to be on watch for prowling bears.

After I concluded, Jonathan opened the floor for questions, which was the most interesting part for me.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: I'm interested in the physics of the everlasting night. You said everything moved at an imperceptibly slow speed unless it was close to you. How about sound?

RONNIE: The world was all but silent. Until I figured out how to play recorded music on headphones and had a piano brought to my house, I was deaf, except for my own ordinary sounds, and my heartbeat, breathing, and voice.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: A follow-up, if I may. Did you teach yourself to play the piano?

RONNIE: I had taken lessons for several years as a child. It all came back to me. Long before I bought the piano—

decades before—I learned to read orchestral scores, and I could play the music in my mind.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: The full orchestra?

RONNIE: If the score called for a full orchestra, yes. I can still do this, by the way. All the parts simultaneously.

<VOCAL SOUNDS OF ADMIRATION>

RONNIE: It kept me alive. Any of you with musical aptitude could learn this if in my circumstances. It's not hard if you have endless hours and have heard the instruments before. You'd be surprised what you can pull from memory when it's all you have.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1 YET AGAIN : Who… <GROAN FROM CROWD> Who is your favorite composer?

JONATHAN: I think we need to move on. Next question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2: What were the animated animals like in the night world? How can you explain their presence? How did they survive, and what did they eat?

RONNIE: JTB, Jonathan, tells me that his colleagues are exploring and documenting the night world across Norway and elsewhere. They check in from time to time and theorize that the imprisoned nocturnal animals are not many in number. They feed on the blood of frozen living creatures. But most of the animals die soon after they arrive. How they got there, they don't know yet, and I couldn't tell you even after centuries because I ran away from them, but maybe it was an animal version of how I came to be there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #3: How did you keep yourself clean?

RONNIE: Sponge baths. Laundry services every normal morning at my night house—several laundry services. I cut my own hair.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #4: Why didn't you age?

RONNIE: I don't know.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #5: You've talked about monsters. Were there actual monsters?

JONATHAN: I'll take this one, Ron. My friends are specifically looking for origins of the Gjengangere, the undead of Norwegian folklore. (Here, there was an audible collective shudder in the room.) Yes, you've heard of them. Ron, Dr. Fjermestad, says he spent 14 months of ordinary nights in the everlasting night world, which comprises 425 years of existence, which by some miracle or his own resilience, he survived. He calls it the Long Night. Every day at sunrise, the Long Night world vanished, and he lived a nominally normal life, though stunted because he had blocked out so much.

Imagine, then, a person trapped in Long Night for years and years. Say, 40 regular years. Times 365, that would amount to 14,600 years of dark existence. If a person could adapt and survive such unimaginable loneliness, what would that do to them in his or her day life? I don't know about you, but I might learn to fear contact with the warm, bright, living world. I might hide. Friends and loved ones might assume I had vanished and died. And if people of the day world ever saw me, they might think I'm a Gjengangere.

RONNIE: Here in the far north, where the sun does not rise for four months—what you call a Polar Night—that would equal 240 *continuous* years of night, not just one year at a time with a typical day between.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6: [An adolescent who had been persistently waving his hand in the air, and suddenly erupted with his urgent question.] So, the vampire must return to his coffin by sunrise or he erupts in flames?

<SMATTERING OF NEVOUS LAUGHTER>

RONNIE: There were many, many times I felt undead. Every culture has its folklore, which grows and changes in the telling. My experience is that these tales have their beginnings in reality, though much different than what they end up being. We are all familiar with how movies based on true events change the story for dramatic purposes, or to fit the story into a two-hour time frame. And we also know that old legends likely exaggerate or supersize real people and events. Then there are whole different genres of invented fantasy and science fiction in which it's all made up.

But what's far more common and less known, is how legends and folk tales flatten real stories to make them more believable. They remove the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies and the odd, seemingly random details that don't fit a simple narrative. They soften the mysteries.

Reality is often truly unbelievable and impossible.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #7: Would you say it was a near-death experience?

RONNIE: No. Not at all. It was a dead, death experience. A decent-into-hell experience.

JONATHAN: Let's move on now. I think Dr. Fjermestad would rather talk about his future.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #8: How fortunate you won the prize and came to this wonderful land of everlasting koselig.

<GENTLE LAUGHTER ACROSS THE GYMNASIUM>

RONNIE: I see the word doesn't need translation.

JONATHAN: For our radio listeners, koselig more or less means cozy.

RONNIE: One English word doesn't quite capture it. Imagine being out in the frosty winter-cold darkness, ice skating with your friends on a glass-clear lake under the soaring mountains and the flaming aurora borealis. Then imagine you all crowding into a fragrant candlelit den warmed by a fireplace, slipping off your snowsuits and boots, and enjoying comfortable chairs, good food, drink, and songs. Afterwards, who knows what?

<AUDIBLE SIGH>

RONNIE: Yes, fortunate, but also fortune. I funded the prize and all expenses myself from what I've made from my books. I did all this from my night world.

This was a surprise to the audience. They knew I wrote a great deal and published a few things, but I never before mentioned in public my astonishing financial success, which I intended to keep in the background. They were still wondering about the vast gulf between me in the nightmare Long Night world and me during the day, when Jonathan moved us along.

JONATHAN: Tell us about your project.

RONNIE: I'm convinced there are others out there, as Jonathan mentioned, imprisoned in the Long Night. In my journeys in that world, I occasionally caught a glimpse of furtive human-shaped figures in the distant shadows. They may have seen me in the same way, and we fled from each

other. These people also exist in the day world, your world. My first wife overdosed on sleeping pills. She may have been trapped in the Long Night cycle and felt she couldn't face another one. We may have someone here in this gym, or wherever you are, where you live and work. They are unaware of how they have fled from pain and put it where it can't hurt them, but it affects them far more than they or you can imagine. The pain takes on a real physical life of its own.

JONATHAN: Your hope is to rescue those people.

RONNIE: We hope to be sending caring, courageous people into the Long Night and finding those who are lost there, comforting them, helping them survive, and then, if possible, creating a way to integrate them with themselves. I'm setting up a foundation…

JONATHAN: [INTERUPTING] It seems we have some enthusiastic visitors.

A handful of tourists wearing the latest outdoorsy casual fashions and carrying around their necks complicated mechanical devices, wandered up the middle aisle towards the front, looking all the world like they were lost. They appeared to have just stepped off a cruise ship. When Windfriede saw them, she jumped from her seat and ran behind me.

"The aliens," she whispered hoarsely. "They're back."

Jonathan heard her, and alas, the sensitive microphone picked up her words, so everyone in the room and Jonathan's entire radio audience heard.

"Somebody shoot them!" Windfriede said to the crowd.

Jonathan took it in stride. "You never know what'll happen on my program," he said, giving a thumbs-up to Motty for

staying on the air. “What can I help you guys with?”

One of the tourist aliens stepped forward. “Sorry interrupting, but my subordinate has words say.”

He grabbed another tourist alien by the collar of his peach and rust-orange pullover jacket and pulled him forward.

Straightening his jacket, he looked at Windfriede and hung his head. “I’m sorry returning you wrong place—ah, time. Wrong time. Wrong time place. I messed. Really sorry. My fault.”

“There. Wasn’t so hard, was it?” the captain alien tourist said to the penitent alien.

The captain alien continued: “I also want officially apologize my government. We did not give proper supervision this intern. We can put this writing, you like?” He looked around for anyone to answer, but we were all still stunned, not sure of what was going on.

Jonathan glanced over to Atlas, asking if this scene was one of his stunts. He shook his head, pointed to himself, and soundlessly mouthed, “Wasn’t me.”

The alien captain pressed on. “We affectionate make this right, friend maiden” he said. “So you wish, we return you your home family. It will be them you never left. And we offer generous compensation your trouble.”

Windfriede then pulled me away from the microphone. “I’m not leaving you. What do you think? Would you like to go?”

“I’d go with you anywhere in the universe. But I need to stick close by in case I relapse.”

She then turned to the aliens. “I thank you for your offer, you

odious fopdoodles. But I have a wonderful life here now. Inform your government you must tell my father, mother, and siblings I am well and happy. And give your vulgar compensation to them!"

Motty, with Atlas egging him on, had turned the microphones on as high as they would go, so the whole private drama had been made public, and the entire audience in the room burst into cheers and applause.

The aliens bowed and meandered away, still lost, and the audience still applauding. The mayor of Camas (don't ask me why he was still with us) shouted after them, "We have a blooming summer theater in my city. Bring your fellow aliens and put on a show!"

Windfriede hugged me, saying through her tears, "Why are these people laughing? Those creatures are horrible. They're the monsters."

She composed herself, walked to a microphone, and began singing the most exquisite, poignant lament you can imagine.

Epilogue

Windfriede's spontaneous performance perfectly concluded the program in Longyearbyen.

As for the aliens, I could have lived without them, but everyone who witnessed their appearance had a good time. That's what's important. As we know, people erect defenses against truth, and a good way to break through is with light, warmth, and humor.

We received dozens, if not hundreds of letters from people who want to join our rescue program. Jonathan set up

protocols for screening and training recruits, and then he said he needed to move on, but he will keep my file with these written documents open. He said Atlas had collected contact info from the aliens, and he and his team are planning to follow up with them next.

I'm retiring soon. I'm giving my practice away to an eager young Portland sleep doctor I met at the Oslo ceremony. Motty asked to run my rescue program, I said I'd love him to, and Jonathan gave his blessing. My next—my *last*—book will be *A Native's Guide to the Long Night*. I won't write a word, if I can help it, but I'll dictate to Windfriede in Middle English or Latin, depending on my vocabulary, and the professor will translate it into Modern English. Atlas said he'll make it into a video game. People will read the book or play the game for entertainment, but if they ever fall into the everlasting Long Night for real, they'll be better prepared to live through the first impossible year.

Windfriede and I plan to build homes somewhere in the far north and south, follow the sun, and to the best of our ability, avoid any darkness. We hope to explore beyond the Arctic and Antarctic Circles. We hope that months of continuous day and congenial fellowship with other people will work a lasting cure, but it's not certain. Even when we face a sunset, which will surely happen, or if I sink into a relapse, we know what to do. We are prepared. Loved ones will join me, and we will spend the most of our time searching out those lost souls who are trapped in the Long Night. With such a purpose, it won't be too bad being there again.

And even now, strangely, you might think, when everything is too loud and glaring during the day, and everyone is rushing here and there, I often miss the soft darkness and restful silence of night, and even more, the luminous, jeweled heavens above.

END

“June Bug”

“June Bug”

“June Bug”

“June Bug”

“Cicada”

Turtle of the World

"Where's Mrs. Barefoot?"

Those were the first words radio celebrity and paranormal investigator Jonathan T. Barron said when I collected him at the Asheville airport. If you don't know yet, he's the famous host of the syndicated program, Strange Days Radio.

"Umm," I said. "My wife divorced me last year on my 27th birthday. No kids. Ahh… *Oh*, my *aunt* teaches at the Cherokee reservation. She couldn't find a substitute for her classes, so, I'm your driver. I'm Carnley Barefoot. May I have your autograph?"

He pushed aside my notebook and pen. "Carnley, later on, please. Help with my luggage, will you?"

"She ain't never married."

"Who?"

"My Aunt Ilana. *Miss* Ilana Barefoot."

On our drive to my home turf of Robbinsville, south of the Great Smoky Mountains Park, I was in awe. Jonathan T. Barron in my 2010 Ford pick-em-up truck—it's my Aunt Ilana's, actually. Me and her are his biggest fans in North Carolina. You wouldn't believe—

"Barefoot," he said. "Is your last name traditional Cherokee?"

"Everybody thinks so, but it's Scots."

"Ms. Barefoot wrote to me about the strange happenings at the Swan Mountain Retreat Center. She said they portend the end of all humanity."

"Holy Moley! The end of all humanity?" I pulled off to the side and a car blared its horn as it flew by. "She never told *me*. It's worse than I guessed."

"You don't think she exaggerated?"

I shook my head. "Mr. Barron. Be real careful there. My aunt *never* exaggerates. The end of humanity. Whew." I put the truck in gear and resumed our drive.

"O-kay," he said. "Trash raided, dogs and cats eaten, mangled birds lying on the ground, the larder broken into and food stolen. Wild screams in the darkness." He removed a photograph from his pocket and flashed it to me. "What do you think this is?"

"Well. I took that picture—I work on the buildings and grounds at the retreat center. We thought it might be bears, or maybe possums or a mountain lion, so I set up a game cam, a hunter camera. I believe it's a product of a government experiment, mixing humans with animal genes."

"Really? A chimera? You don't think it's a cousin to Bigfoot, maybe a heretofore unknown native ape, an ape with these large white eyes?"

"No sir. It's a government conspiracy—to breed human weapons, better fighters. Some escaped from the federal compound in Andrews. The place is still down there, and fully operational. Black helicopters flying in and out all the time. That whole Eric Rudolph bomber deal? They made everyone believe their phones was tapped. But it was cover for building their laboratories. It's all on the shortwave broadcasts. Did I tell you I'm a ham radio operator?"

Mr. Barron glanced at me sideways and went dumb for a time. Later on I chanced, "I've got photographs of the fed's compound. I could take you there."

"We'll see," he said, and I heard skepticism. Dang. I thought he'd be different from other people.

On the curvy road along Fontana Lake, just past the yellow warning sign that says, "Fallen Rocks," we rounded a bend, and ahead was an old Indian guy standing beside the road. As we neared him, a stray gust full of leaves and swirling roadside litter hit him in the face. He tried to step away, but flipped backwards over the guardrail and disappeared on yonder side. I quick pulled over at a wide spot on the shoulder, before the rocky cliffs. Mr. Barron ran to see what became of the man, and I did, too. He was lying on his back.

"Chief Fallen Rocks, himself," I said over Mr. Barron's shoulder.

He looked back at me. "*What* are you talking about?"

"The road sign?"

Mr. Barron frowned and then helped the man to his feet and asked how he did.

"Not bad, not bad," the Chief said. "It was a comfortable place to rest. The world feels empty."

A smell of digested alcohol wafted into our faces.

"Can I take you someplace?" Mr. Barron asked.

"I live up the road a way."

It's forest and water everywhere around there. We drove a short bit and turned up a dirt drive to a well-kept double-wide, a nice Toyota Sequoia SUV parked beside it. Mr. Barron and I walked him inside.

"I never got your name," Mr. Barron said.

"Chief Fallen Rocks."

Mr. Barron turned cherry red. "We're sorry," he said, glaring at me. "We thought you were unconscious."

"My name is George Mankiller, but falling rocks have killed men at those cliffs above the road. My ancestors were hereditary chiefs."

"You're Cherokee?"

"Full-blood."

"You don't live on the reservation."

"I moved away a year ago. The reservation—it's private land called the Qualla Boundary—and the casino money were stealing my initiative. I want to set a better example for our people. Do you know about the epidemic suicide rate among Native American young people?"

"I see. Well, Mr. Mankiller—"

"I'm George."

"George, we must be going."

"Wait, wait a minute."

The Chief stepped to a rough shelf piled with carvings and lifted one of them, it the size of a salad plate. The carving was a turtle with a woman creature on its back. "I make these to sell to tourist shops, decent shops that carry authentic Native American stuff, not cheap China trash. The quality of my

work isn't exquisite, but the grain and color of the wood is elegant, elegant enough. Take this as a gift."

"The detail and finish are very fine," Mr. Barron said. "It's too rich to give away." He took out his wallet.

"No, no. You've already paid."

They argued around and around. In the end, however, the Chief was stronger.

Back in Aunt Ilana's Ford pickup, Mr. Barron scowled. "Don't *ever* refer to him as Chief Fallen Rocks again. It's degrading. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

The Swan Mountain Hipster Center was up a narrow hollow that followed the curves of Rattlers Creek. We passed the carved sign along the highway and continued up the narrow asphalt road. Where the creek meandered through a wide flat cove surrounded by high ridges, we pulled up to a log building labeled "Office". Mr. Barron looked up toward the rock-boned ridges and I said, "Yes, sir, there's ginseng all over them woods, and behind the hills, the wild Russian boars roam."

A woman with a long grey ponytail stalked out of the office. "Hello Carnley," she said. "Run over any squirrels lately?"

"No ma'am, squirrels are-n't in season right now. It's spring. They're having their babies." Ms. Haversham doesn't like country-boy rednecks like me, and I give her a hard time. "Miss Haversham, this is Jonathan T. Barron."

"Mr. Barron, I don't know what you'll find here in the way of the supernatural, but you're welcome to enjoy our *natural* retreat center. Carnley will give you a tour. Make sure he shows you the meditation pool farther up the creek."

"Yes, sir," I said, "you don't want to miss that."

"And Carnley, while you're there, remove the Clemson ball cap from the Buddha, and please be sure to haul the recycling to the landfill, and finish the brush cutting. We have an Herbal Healing Conference coming in for the weekend. Mr.

Barron, we have you in Cabin 9 at the top. Please, please do not disturb our other visitors. Silence is powerful." And with that, she turned on a dime and retreated into her office.

"She's really sweet," I said and stretched my back.

"I'm sure of it," he said, with that skeptical look of his. "A Clemson ball cap?"

"My alma matter. Go Tigers."

"What was your major?"

"Ummm… art. But I had to quit my first semester. Partied too much."

Someone was shaking me as I slept on my cot at the old maintenance building. "Carnley… Carnley… wake up."

I cracked open my eyes to see Jonathan Barron looming over me in the pale smudge of early morning light.

"What do you want?" I asked surly-like.

He flicked on the overhead, and as groggy and blinded as I was, I saw that he weren't afraid, but excited, elated even, and wearing his jacket. I asked, "Did you find my jar of moonshine in your cabin? I heard the ladies hid—"

"Get dressed," he ordered. "We need to see George Mankiller."

For a man who makes his living by talking, Mr. Barron was constipated as to words while we drove to the Chief's house. The sun remained hidden behind the ridge and pinked the springy clouds to the west. He refused to answer my questions and asked if I had faked the photograph of the mountain ape.

"Nope."

He shook his head and muttered, "She's beautiful, so beautiful, but sad. A forlorn succubus."

A what? He couldn't have meant Ms. Haversham. Had she been sleepwalking in her nightie?

The Chief was not at his double-wide when we arrived, but an Indian in a police uniform pulled up in the nice Toyota Sequoia as we were about to leave. When he got out of the vehicle, I noticed the holstered gun at his side.

"Good morning, Mr. Mankiller," Mr. Barron said, "Your carving. A turtle with a feminine form reclining on its back. What can you tell me about the carving? Its meaning."

I hadn't recognized the Chief—he'd been transformed. He saw me staring and gave a severe look and said, "I'm an on-call security guard. Usually I work at a pawnshop in Murphy, but last night I did an extra shift in Franklin. All night. Son, when you picked me up along the road, it was my first whiskey drunk in 43 years—since Viet Nam—and it will be my last."

The Chief now turned to Mr. Barron. "There's a reason you want to know about my carving."

"Look at these photographs. Carnley set up game cameras at the Swan Mountain Retreat Center, thinking that a wild animal was attacking and killing their dogs and cats, and was stealing food from their kitchen. Instead he captured these images."

The Chief nodded wisely as he shuffled between the pictures.

"And last night," Mr. Barron continued, "I took these other photographs of this ghost-like being. She bears a resemblance to the creature on the back of your turtle."

The Chief held the second group of photos in his steady hands, and as I peered over his shoulder, my knees quivered. For what I saw scared me. One of the new pictures showed a form, like a dark-haired girl, clothed in a silky, shaggy nightgown. And then, as if my eyes were playing tricks, or like them holographic anatomy posters at the doctor's office that change when you move your head, the figure turned into a seven-foot hemlock tree. Then it transformed back into a girl again.

"Is there any relationship between the girlish being in this photo and the monster with white eyes in the first group of photos?" Mr. Barron asked.

The Chief walked up the steps to his double-wide and sat on a rocker on the deck. He glanced up to where sky showed through the trees on the ridge, which had no leaves out yet, but

I knew he wasn't seeing. As I watched him, his mystery expression cleared like a muddy, disturbed pool does when the fresh water pours in.

"Are you ready to understand the turtle and its burden?" he said at last.

"I don't know," Mr. Barron said.

"I didn't think so." After a pause, Chief said, "The turtle is carved from hemlock wood, from the hemlock tree."

"Hemlock?"

I was fearful to utter a word, and the Chief said, "You don't know the hemlock tree? You drive and I'll give directions. I'll buy you some coffee. You want coffee?"

The Chief fetched a duffel bag and we drove in Aunt's truck to Robbinsville and stopped for coffee. After that, the road passed through brown forest tinged with red and gold of tree buds, and the green of swelling leaves until we arrived at the Kilmer Memorial Forest. From the parking lot we followed a path along a creek until the Chief stopped and pointed. Our gaze traveled up.

"It's dead," he said about the towering, bare-branchy column before us, its mahogany inner bark exposed, outer bark lying in heaps around its base.

"It can't be." Mr. Barron craned his neck up and down. He took a camera from his pocket and shot some pictures. "How many people would it take to reach all the way around the trunk?"

"Five of your wingspan. But look." The Chief swept his arms in a panorama.

Mr. Barron and me turned and saw dozens of red trunks.

"They're all dead," I said.

"The world feels empty. No one thinks about how much we've lost. No one cares. This forest has never been logged, and these trees were centuries old. I often come here to collect wood for my carvings—the Forest Service downed a dead tree for me."

Mr. Barron sat on a rock and considered for a long while. The Chief pulled out a knife and began carving a stick of

ironwood he had in his pocket. I watched three squirrels playing tag on a giant Tulip Poplar trunk. Finally Mr. Barron said, "Have you ever heard of dryads? Spirits associated with living trees?"

"I've seen them," the Chief said. "We call trees 'the Standing People', but they are more. When I was a child in the Qualla Boundary, our school teacher brought us here for a field trip and I saw them. No one else did—they were like clouds of flower petals swirling with the wind during a rainstorm. Not only hemlock spirits, but of the other trees, too. This forest was full of life. In all my walks since then, in the Smoky National Park and elsewhere, I never saw them again, but I felt their presence and heard them. They gave me joy."

I worked up the courage to ask, "What about them white-eyed monsters?"

The Chief glowered and said, "Woolly adelgids are like white eyes. They're an insect that covers the stems of hemlocks with tiny cottony, woolly balls. They invaded from China and are killing all the hemlocks—the ones not treated. That's why these trees are all dead, Mr. Barron, Carnley. I didn't fall over the guardrail. I was pushed by a monster with white eyes and hair like horns." He let out a big sigh. "Let's leave now. I can hear the Tulip Poplar, those huge trees are alive, but the forest is half dead, half silent, and I'm depressed."

"We have live hemlocks at Swan Mountain," I said, expecting the Chief to take my scalp off. "I treated them for woolly adelgids myself. It was my job. Poured the chemical on the roots of the big ones. Sprayed the small ones with insecticidal soap."

Mr. Barron and the Chief looked at each other like they thought the same idea at the same time.

"Will you take me to the retreat center?" the Chief asked.

"Why not?" I said. "My Aunt Ilana told me you can grow medicinal mushrooms on hemlock wood. I should tell Ms. Haversham. She'll love hearing it."

Back at Swan Mountain, the Chief walked around and said the place swarmed with hemlock spirits, but they were sick—they'd been poisoned by my chemical treatments. After that, he slept the rest of the day away in Mr. Barron's cabin. I had chores because of the group coming in.

Mr. Barron talked with Aunt Ilana on the phone. It was a Friday and she planned to come over Saturday morning and bring materials we might find helpful. In case you didn't know, she volunteers at the Cherokee museum. Mr. Barron set up more night video cameras to catch another tree spirit or one of them monsters in action.

Later in the afternoon, the guests began arriving for their Sing for Peace Rally, or whatever. Herbal Healing. That's it. The Chief woke from his nap and asked me for a ride home so he could get ready for the pawn shop, but the shop called to say they were locking up early—some kind of trouble there. They needed him right away.

When driving to the Chief's double-wide, two cars overtook us, a van and a sedan, actually, and passed us on a curve at a high rate of speed, the van riding close to the sedan's butt. I shook my fist out the window and shouted unprintable remarks about inbred livestock. When we rounded the curve, the van was in the ditch on its side, and two jackasses from the sedan were popping at it with a rifle and a shotgun.

I stopped dead in the road right there.

Someone clambered from the van and started firing back at the other men, who dove for cover.

"Oh my Lord," the Chief exclaimed. "Let's get out of here." I noticed he had his pistol in hand. I backed up 100 yards and we heard and felt an explosion.

"We'd have to drive clear around Santeetlah Lake to get to your place by another route, Chief," I said, trembling like a beech leaf in winter. "It'd take another hour."

"I know," he said, now calm. (He's a funny guy.) "I'm calling 911." The phone to his ear, the Chief took on a blank look.

"What's happening?"

"A recording. It says there's civil unrest in progress in western North Carolina. What does that mean, a war? 'Everyone should stay calm, stay home, and protect yourselves. The government will restore order by Saturday morning.' I'll bet." He then looked at me sternly. "My name is George Mankiller."

"You said that before."

"You just called me 'Chief'."

"I did?"

"In Vietnam I killed men for less."

For a second I thought he might kill me, then he laughed. "Don't worry, son. 'Chief' doesn't bother me. Have you got a gun and ammunition with you?"

I wobbled my head up and down. "A shotgun. Why not? But don't tell them hipster ladies."

"Get it out."

"It's the end of all humanity."

We reached the center without further trouble, meaning, at a stop sign, when Mr. Mankiller brandished my black tactical shotgun, a pair of likely fellows who might have robbed us, reconsidered.

Ms. Haversham greeted us with a worried, twitchy expression—she almost appeared human. "Your aunt arrived a few minutes ago," she said. "She's quite upset. School let out early. Apparently there was a riot in the town of Cherokee and she decided to come now. She's resting in Mr. Barron's cabin. If you're staying, Mr. Mankiller, I'm afraid you'll have to bunk there, too. We are at capacity this weekend for the Herbal Conference."

The sky had taken on a strange, subdued glow, with thick lowering clouds overhead. "I believe we've lost an hour of day," I said.

"There's a storm approaching," Ms. Haversham said. "A tornado watch is in effect. We're serving dinner in the dining hall for a few more minutes, so if you want to eat, you should

hurry. Carnley, you have your radio?" She meant my handheld, not my ham, which is housed in my storage shack above the mental blankness pond. I have a power generator, too, in case of a zombie apocalypse or whatever.

"Do you have your radio?" she repeated.

"Yes sir, I mean ma'am."

We loaded up carryout boxes from the main kitchen and took them to Cabin 9—more a bunkhouse than a cabin—sleeps 16, in fact. But it has a cooking stove. Aunt Ilana was lounging in a cozy chair near the fireplace, with her eyes half-closed, a blanket over her legs, a mug of tea beside her. Her dark hair, usually done in a bun, was let down. Mr. Barron was bent over the big dining table with maps or charts, and photographs spread before him.

He came up to us and spoke in a low, exultant voice. "We know more about the connection between the dryads and the white-eyed creatures. Your aunt brought rubbings from Jaducal… "

"Judaculla Rock," she said faintly from the chair.

"Judaculla Rock," Mr. Barron repeated, then whispered, "Your Aunt Ilana is so young, younger than you, Carnley. Not yet 30, for sure. And pretty. Brown eyes. Is she married?"

"No, she's not," I breathed out with true respect. "I told you already, but we're not so certain of her age. She eats a seed diet and ain't nobody smart enough for her."

"Where would she find an intelligent man around here?" Mr. Mankiller whispered.

"Or, one with good manners," she said robustly.

"I'm sorry," I said. "We thought you was asleep. Aunt Barefoot, may I introduce Chief, I mean Mr. George Mankiller—you've already traded names with your hero, Mr. Barron, I presume."

She jumped from the chair and shook the Chief's hand. She was still wearing her teacher's outfit—a skirt and blouse topped by a green sweater and tailored for her slim figure—but not too slim. "George and I are already acquainted. He's helped out a great deal at the museum, and we sell his carvings

at the arts and crafts store."

"From putting our heads together about Jad— Judaculla Rock," Mr. Barron said, "this is what we concluded. Let's sit down. Carnley, would you mind bringing us coffee? I made a pot."

When I appeared with full coffee cups, Aunt was saying, "So, Judaculla is the name of a legendary monster who leaps from mountain to mountain. The rock of talc stone supposedly marks his territory. Possibly he is pure invention, or possibly he's based on true stories of a Sasquatch-like being. Stylized engravings on Judaculla Rock resemble the monster in the photographs, but the fascinating part is, we also find engravings showing the Standing People spirits transitioning into the monster. In other words, the monsters are the tree spirits in another form."

"Judaculla is the name Sequoyah gave to the giant Goliath in the Cherokee translation of the Bible," the Chief said.

Everyone stared at the confused carvings in the photos for a few moments, moments that stretched into minutes of mental blankness. At last I said, "Would anyone like popcorn to go with their coffee?"

When the storm fell on us like a dam bursting, not only was I in the dark because the electric quit, the racket was so loud I couldn't hear the popcorn popping. We cook with profane gas at the Center, so, I just kept shaking the pan and knew on instinct when it was done. Turned out a fine batch.

Just as I handed bowls around with the help of a flashlight, Ms. Haversham's voice screeched over my handheld radio.

"Carnley, get your rain clothes on and walk our visitors to the Great Hall. One cabin at a time. We're distributing LED lamps down here. Nobody has power, and the ladies are scared."

"All of them? Walk all them ladies? How many?"

"We have 83 guests. A few will need to be driven."

"I'll use the bus, for everyone. It's too wet for walking."

If the ladies—and the men guests, too—were scared by the dark, they were petrified by the lashing squalls of rain and the

torrents of muddy water running over the road as I drove them load-by-load to the Great Hall. Even with umbrellas, many were soaked to the bone. The Chief lit a fire in the yawning fireplace, and I pulled out blankets and old sleeping bags and mattresses from the basement. Aunt and Mr. Barron settled into rockers, a thick blanket a piece.

Storms in the mountains follow a pattern. Unless they're hurricane-fed, they kick up a fuss for a while and they're done. This storm started loud and heavy and grew worse. Thunder exploded over our heads and crackled on and on. The ladies, and men too, screamed and then after awhile only moaned in anguish. And I thought they loved ole Mother Nature. The lightning strobed with the thunder, taking on a cadence like a fire and brimstone preacher does, and I dozed off until new sounds disturbed my suede unconsciousness, sounds from outside, like of battle. The wind surged, thrashing the trees, and we heard roars, long shrieks, wailing, and keening. Then came a colossal crash which jarred the whole building and renewed the screaming from the guests.

"Carnley, see what hit us," Ms. Haversham said, shaking where she stood, though I didn't know if it was her or the floor. I threw on a poncho and, happening to see a bicycle helmet, I put that on, too, and went outside. The whole universe seethed in motion, the air full of flying water, unknown objects—leaves and branches, I guess. Raindrops stung my eyes. I immediately slipped and fell. The ground was covered in slimy things. Fish. Dead fish.

Holy Moley!

Hanging on to the shrubbery, I worked around to the uphill side of the Great Hall, where the crash had been, and found a gigantic rock braced against the wall, now partly caved in. The rock had rolled or slid there. I breathed for a minute and was picking my way back to the door when some running thing slammed into me, knocking me flat, my face mashed into a fish. I rose up to hands and knees, and looking around, I saw animated shadows, hairy upright shadows with glowing white eyes stalking amidst the chaos, rolling dumpsters, uprooting

small trees, and tossing boulders. Nearby, three of them was wrestling in a heap. They smelled like rotting corpses. I crawled to the door and banged on it to be let back in.

When Ms. Haversham opened up and saw me and the mayhem, she grew pale, then paler. She jerked me inside, slammed the door, and ordered dry clothes and blankets. She put her arm around my back and guided me to the fireplace, and then brought some hot cider. When the clothes arrived, I changed somehow, made it back to the hearth, and fell asleep on the floor.

In the morning when I woke up (a pillow under my head), I smelled coffee, bacon, and eggs. Well… if truth be told, I only fantasized the bacon. Ms. Haversham and a few intrepid guests had contrived to cook. She brought me a tray with the breakfast that I wolfed down. About then Mr. Barron and Aunt promenaded into the Great Hall. Ms. Haversham pulled open the curtains of the big windows and I recoiled at the bright light. Except for threads of fog and scattered broken clouds, the sky was as blue as blue. I put my tray down and stepped closer to the window. The trees on the long slope up to the ridge had mangled and broken tops. The ground—the planted areas and grass—as much as I could see through ripped leaves and sticks, looked like it had been plowed by a herd of wild pigs—pigs which had partly eaten the fish from the sky.

Aunt Ilana came and stood next to me. “We can’t find Mr. Mankiller,” she said. “Nobody has seen him since he built the fire last night.”

“Then, who’s that?” I asked.

A reddish male person wearing leather leggings, a kind of loincloth, and no shirt was picking a path across the flotsam toward the Great Hall. His skin was dyed bright red except for a painted black band across his face like a raccoon. A couple wild turkey feathers waved from the top of his head and he carried an odd knobby club. Aunt, Mr. Barron, Ms. Haversham, me, and a few guests ran outside to meet him.

“Mr. Mankiller,” Ms. Haversham said, “What are you

wearing?"

"My clothes. What are *you* wearing?"

She looked down at herself, at her ordinary blouse and pants, but she couldn't think of nothing to answer.

"I talked to them," he said. "I talked to the Tsuga spirits… to the Tsul'Kalu'. The storm washed woolly adelgids from the tree branches."

Oh my. Brandishing his wooden club and defying Goliaths in the middle of the storm? I was impressed.

But Chief wasn't willing to explain more, and besides we had other stuff to think about. Nobody was getting cell phone reception and Rattlers Creek roared and tossed across the road, so we couldn't get out. One of the men guests was having chest pains, so Chief had to see about him. Aunt went to help the Chief.

Me and Mr. Barron walked up towards my quarters to crank the apocalypse generator and see what news we could hear on my ham rig. As we neared the meditation pond, we heard the rap, rap of helicopter rotors beating over the ridge, then one bird appeared and two more. I looked at Mr. Barron, feeling self-satisfied and vindicated.

"I *told* you," I said. He took no notice.

The black choppers whistled overhead and across the opposite ridge, and as the last one ranged nearly out of view, it blew up in a ball of flame. We couldn't believe it. Mr. Barron staggered to a bench and eased himself down. I sat next to him and we stared out over the pond full of floating branches. Clouds of lacy bugs hovered over the water, a few dipping and touching the surface.

We both sighed at the same time.

"Your aunt wrote that this was about the end of humanity. I can see it happening, but I don't understand why."

"No idea, myself. What *do* you and Aunt Ilana discuss, anyway?"

"Not this. She won't elaborate about what she meant in her warning. How did she know what would happen? She's been

giving me a history of the region. Logging and the forced exile of the Cherokee Nation. The early naturalist explorer, William Bartram."

"When it's the right time, she'll tell you."

We went on up to my shack. My antenna had been knocked down, so I strung up some wire and tried reaching first one and then another of my radio buddies who lived in the area, but they didn't answer.

"Should I call Earl?" I asked.

"Who's Earl?"

"He's my ex's beau, her fiancé. He's in Robbinsville. He usually won't talk with me." I got on his favorite radio frequency, or band. "Earl, are you out there? What's going on? Earl?"

I waited. Even when the world was normal, it took a minute for Earl to stop being jealous.

"Hey Carnley," Earl said finally, but he was mumbling. "You still alive? I guess you're in an isolated area out there. How's it goin'?"

"I'm well, considering. You?"

"Same. Did you know Susie is havin' her baby? We've set a date to get married, finally."

"You better marry her, then, you son of a bitch."

"Carnley, please," Mr. Barron said and touched my arm. I don't know why, but I had an impulse to blast my ham set with a shotgun.

"Earl…" I said. "Earl, you still there?" There was another minute of silence.

"Carnley, we're here in my bunker. Susie and me. She's havin' a baby—she's havin' it now. Right now. I mean right *now*!" To make his point stronger, Susie panted in the background and groaned.

Earl went on. "We're scared to make noise. I'm afraid to run my generator—and batteries won't last. There's a war going on, Carnley, a damn war. People are runnin' around with guns and axes, lightin' fires and lootin'. It's a feud, or a massacre, one outrage escalates to another far worse. It started

at the casino, I heard. Breathe, dear. Even police went berserk. There are foragin' gangs. The governor activated the National Guard and even they became involved. Units are fightin' among themselves. Helicopters, Carnley, your spooky black helicopters. As far as I can tell, war's engulfed the western counties."

"How's your food and water, Earl?"

"Good, good. I need better ventilation. Hey Carnley, how's it where you are? Susie just said we might join you, if that's okay. We can't stay hunkered down here forever. We need to get out of town. Maybe we'll try at night."

"Sure, Earl. Sure."

"Wait," Earl said. We could hear muffled gunfire over the radio behind him. "Gotta go. If we show up, we'll wave a white flag from the edge of the woods. Don't shoot us."

"The creek is blocking the road, Earl," I said, but he was gone already.

We scanned through the frequencies and heard narration after narration, and it pretty much confirmed what Earl said. The only new thing was the feds had mobilized regular military to invade, more or less, to restore order. But they wouldn't arrive for a few days.

"Which might make it all worse," Mr. Barron said, and I agreed.

"There's one thing I wanted to ask Earl," he said. "I don't understand why he and your ex aren't affected by this madness. And why aren't we? Is it we've not been provoked? What kind of person is Earl?"

"Just an ordinary mountain redneck, like me. He does the same kind of work I do, sort of, and we used to have a business together."

"What kind of work?"

"Tree removal, firewood cutting and sales."

"Really?"

"Why not?" I said.

"What does he do now?"

"Same thing, only more advanced. He's got an Associates

Degree in Horticulture. He does landscape design and installation."

"Does he treat hemlocks for woolly adelgids?"

"Why not?"

"Does he have any healthy hemlocks around his house?"

"The last I seen, why not? Some big ones. He lives next to a park."

"The city park has hemlocks?"

"Nope. It's a memorial park, a cemetery. He treated the hemlocks there."

"Is your radio still on?"

"Nope," I said.

"I'm still hearing gunfire."

We both listened.

"Dang," I said. "It's below the Great Hall."

We ran outside and the noise grew louder. Then I went back in and pulled out two gun bags, one with a carbine—the Chief still had my tactical shotgun—and a pistol with high-capacity magazines. I gave the carbine to Mr. Barron.

"What do I do with this?" he said.

"Okay…" As we trotted along, I gave him a 15-second shooting workshop. He looked at me with his trademarked skepticism and I said, "Point in safe direction until needed. Squeeze trigger. You'll be fine."

"I'm joking, Carnley. If you listened to my program you'd know I saw combat in Afghanistan."

"Oh yeah, sorry, I forgot in the hurry."

By the time we reached the Great Hall, it was quiet and we saw the Chief walking up the hill from the trees that are toward the entrance, club in hand, with a fierce face. Aunt Ilana emerged from some bushes next to the Great Hall and she had my shotgun.

The Chief sat down on a retaining wall along the sidewalk and said, "I snuck behind them."

"Monsters?" I said.

"No. Human beings with weapons. Two raiders." He motioned to my carbine in Barron's hands. "You heard them. I

think they were scouts."

Ms. Haversham had by then come out of hiding inside the Great Hall and joined us. "Anyone hurt? Will they be bringing others?" she said anxiously, but then, "Mr. Barron, put that rifle away! Ms. Barefoot, you too? What is this, a militia? We don't allow them on campus. I don't approve of firearms. Carnley, is that a gun?"

"Miss Haversham," I said. "I don't think you should worry about guns or about invading scouts, because I believe Mr. Chief Mankiller knocked them guys on the head with his funny war club."

That was Saturday. More storms was on the way, and they continued off and on with added intensity overnight, peaking Sunday morning with a tornado which ripped by the edge of campus and tore the roof off the Great Hall. Everyone had been hiding in the basement, and the place was a grubby, smelly mess and we were all hungry, if not thirsty. We did have water, more than we liked. Meanwhile, between the tumultuous tempests, I listened to outside broadcasts about battles everywhere in the region. I never did raise Earl again. I hoped the baby was okay.

Mr. Barron and Aunt Ilana got cozy—they huddled in a corner together much of the daytime and sort of slept in their sleeping bags snugged up to each other… like everyone else did all around, there being no floor space and no privacy. I heard her tell him that she was adopted from a foster home, which I knew already.

So, by Monday morning we had peace from the sky and we begun to hope the storms were done and they were. The battles and riots ended, too.

We spent the week taking care of people and cleaning up the campus. The flooded creek shrunk to normal and the main roads out of the damaged area of the state got cleared, so by Thursday we ran guests out to the Asheville airport. Most drove themselves away as soon as they could. Everything was a mess out there. Burned buildings. Wrecked cars. Drowned

people.

On Saturday afternoon, we (Aunt, Mr. Mankiller, Mr. Barron, and me) drove to Franklin to a professional radio studio to do Mr. Barron's program live, his once-a-week program called Strange Days Radio. I told him we could broadcast from Swan Mountain Retreat on my ham rig and have it relayed to FM, but he said he needed more credibility than that would afford. The guests each had a piece to contribute to the program—I just sat in the engineer's booth wearing headphones—and we took some interesting calls from locals, but Mr. Mankiller's words were most shocking of all, to me, anyway.

Aunt Ilana's indeed were shocking, but not surprising for someone who knows her, if that makes sense.

I got the transcript later on and this is what they said in the interview, the important parts. I'm skipping the intro and the parts I've already told about—all the weird stuff that had happened before.

MR. BARRON: Mr. Mankiller, George. When we first met, you offered me this carved turtle as a thank you gift. The wood is hemlock. On its back rests a lovely dryad. What's the significance of the turtle in Cherokee tradition?

MR. MANKILLER: In the beginning, the world was covered by water, and the Creator tended the Tree of Life in Heaven. He made a daughter for himself to keep him company, and then he created a man for her. The woman talked a lot and liked to play. She got rambunctious and fell through a hole at the base of the tree. She fell and fell. The Creator asked all the creatures for a volunteer to catch her and none stepped forward, none but the turtle. The birds and other creatures brought mud from the sea bottom and piled it on the turtle's back because it was not wide enough for her, and so he caught and saved her. The turtle represents the Earth, the Turtle Island.

MR. BARRON: Dryads, or by the Cherokee name, Standing People. What are they? Their relationship to the trees.

AUNT: Some believe that Standing People are spirits of trees, and this is true, but not entirely true. Standing People spirits are separate beings that are associated with trees, living in symbiosis with them. They and the trees live in dependency with one another. When a tree dies, a Standing Person may die. That is, slowly fade into nonexistence—she blows away like dry leaves, or she may connect with another tree. The tree spirits have the ability, not always within their control, to alter their appearances, even taking on a human form, but they must always be in relationship with their tree species, as for example, by simply consuming the hemlock's inner bark.

MR. MANKILLER: <clears throat> Oh, my word. I never knew the meaning of the engravings on the Judaculla rock—not until now, until Miss Barefoot explained. The Standing People turn into monsters when they are separated from their trees, or when the trees die and no others are near, or when they consume human chemicals, or garbage.

AUNT: You had to learn this for yourselves.

MR. BARRON: Well, um… I don't know what to say. So, do humans become monsters, too? Is this the explanation for the violence?

MR. MANKILLER: I have felt the loss of the trees. It's why I got dirty drunk the other day. There's a spiritual connection between us and the natural world. Moral decline results in environment degradation when we lose touch with the natural world. Our spiritual poverty pollutes nature, nature then abandons us and we become poorer. It spirals down and down.

Chief Mankiller gathered himself and spoke the next words as a tuneless chant: "There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint, with bloodshed upon bloodshed. Therefore the land will mourn; and everyone who dwells there will waste away with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air; even the fish of the sea will be taken away."

MR. BARRON: Is that a Cherokee prophecy?

MR. MANKILLER: It's from the Bible. You know, I never said that the feminine figure on the back of my carved turtle is a hemlock spirit. She's not a Standing Person at all. She's human. She represents the human race that fell from the tree of life.

Awkward silence followed.

The engineer in the booth beside me leaned forward into his microphone. "Somebody say something. We are live. I'm breaking in four, three, two—"

MR. BARRON: Um, you say it's an environmental issue. It's connected. What, what can we do? Will these insane incidents continue or spread elsewhere? What can we do to prevent them in the future?

AUNT: There's work in progress to preserve the eastern and Carolina hemlocks from extinction. Volunteers collect seeds and grow them in conservation banks. There's one in Chile, South America, others in North Carolina. Some people tell of a giant hemlock hidden away in the forest. She's unaffected by the woolly adelgid. She has developed a natural toxin that makes her unpalatable to the little beasts. If we could collect seeds from her and propagate them, her resistance would pass on to her offspring and thus, in time, we could repopulate.

MR. BARRON: What a fascinating surprise. Our guest is not only expert on Cherokee culture and history, but she's a botanist as well.

AUNT: Another idea is to harvest the dead giants before the lumber decays. You'd have to create a non-profit organization to donate the proceeds to the hemlock conservation bank and to the nursery program of growing resistant trees. The organization would educate the public about the tragic loss of our trees, one as significant as the loss of the American Chestnut. The lumber should be stockpiled because with so many dead, it will take a century for new trees to be replenished. Hemlock lumber from eastern trees will be a rarity, and when people buy it, like in Mr. Mankiller's superb carving work, they'll know they're contributing to the tree's

preservation.

MR. MANKILLER: This is all fine, but what can we do now? The storms and monsters will return again, and soon. There will be more collapses. They'll spread throughout the whole Turtle Island.

AUNT: The momentary suspension of human conscience was triggered by the rage of what you call monsters, the Tsuga spirits. If they could be moved, moved to where hemlocks are healthy, it would leave our region spiritually depleted, but it might prevent violent outbreaks.

MR. BARRON: Where would that region be?

AUNT: The Pacific Northwest. It's a different species there, but still in the genus Tsuga. Some Standing People could go to Japan, too.

MR. BARRON: And how does one transport tree spirits? By train or airplane? Would they ride in cargo, or would they insist on first class?

From here on the transcript doesn't catch the drama, so I drop it entirely. Mr. Barron had made his last comment with that rude skepticism which so annoys, and he also wore a sarcastic smirk on his face. I had warned him. He had not treated Aunt's idea with respect, something I learned to do long ago—after all, she lets me drive her pickup truck.

And this is where things got truly shocking. First, the humidity jumped and my bones begun to ache. I felt oppressed, like when a storm nears. The glass between us and the studio steamed over, so it was hard to see, but it seemed like I was looking into a greenhouse stuffed with plants. I heard a deep rumble from outside the building. I jumped up and peered through the glass. There was Aunt Ilana… and I'll say it plainly… she was fading in and out between her self, a tree spirit in a silky shaggy gown, a conifer tree, and the white-eyed monster.

Holy Moley!

Seeing how no one had been talking sense during this event—I heard a loud inhuman whisper mixed with my aunt singing—the unfazed engineer cut to a commercial break.

We ran around to the studio, and when we opened the door, a musty smell both rank and fresh hit us. Maybe of decaying leaves and sweat, a mix of that and the perfume of Clammy Azaleas. Mr. Barron, Aunt, and Mr. Mankiller was sitting around the table as they had been. Mr. Mankiller looked shocked, but wise. Aunt appeared vibrant and seductive. Mr. Barron looked bewildered, but happy. Mostly happy. In fact, he and Aunt was holding hands until I said, "What's going on here?"

The engineer said, "Whatever just happened, we're going back on air. Callers are waiting. Compose yourselves." He ran back to his booth. "In three, two, one…"

"Good evening, folks," Mr. Barron said, "Strange Days Radio is back." (He's a professional.) "We've been talking about moving hemlock dryads from western North Carolina to the Pacific Northwest. Ms. Ilana Barefoot and Mr. George Mankiller are our guests tonight. Ms. Barefoot has an idea she told me about during our break."

"The wind, Jonathan," she said. "The prevailing winds, of course. We will sail from west to east around our planet, the Turtle Island, in vessels made of hemlock wood."

"Sailing ships on the ocean?"

"No, my dear sir, helium windships in the air. What else could they be? Mr. Mankiller, will you carve their decorations for us?"

He saluted. "It would be my pleasure."

Okay. So, I thought, that solved the mysteries of my Aunt Ilana and the monsters. There *was* always something eccentric about her, and now I knew why. I suppose I'll be collecting her tiny, winged hemlock seeds deep in the mountains. And they'll become… my what?

Cousins?

END

“Bug Eyed Amphibian”

“Iguana”

“Centipede Salamander”

“Centipede Salamander”

Odd Fellows

Grandma Middleton always guessed right. If you don't believe me, then explain how just a week after Grandpa's funeral, she won a $251 million jackpot in the South Carolina Education Lottery. Anyway, because she didn't need outside information, and having been frugal all her life, she didn't pay for internet at her house. Which is why my cousin Duncan and I were spending Saturday afternoon using the Beaufort library's WiFi for our history assignment about heroes of the Revolutionary War.

At least *I* worked. Duncan kept staring toward the blonde librarian and sniffing. He removed his headphones, adjusted his hearing aids, and straightened the eyeglasses perched on his largish nose.

"She's twenty or more," I whispered. "Way too old for you."

"Introduce us, will you?"

"I don't know her."

"Introduce yourself first."

I smirked at him. "Okay, you asked for it."

We walked up together, Duncan bumping his knee into the counter.

"Hi, my name is Carlson Middleton," I said in my library voice. "I know Carlson is a weird name for a girl with brunette French braids and a feminine, but exceptionally fit 5-5 build. My deceased parents followed the fashion of giving girls the last names of presidents, or whatever. This here's my cousin. He's almost normal, except for his nose. Like me, he's not old enough to drive, but he thinks you're cute."

The blonde glared at me, and then him. "Excuse me, my shift is over." That's what she said in a Russian-sounding accent. She gathered her bag, disappeared into the back room, and emerged moments later wearing a green jacket. She had ignored us altogether.

With his eyes half-closed behind his thick glasses, Duncan breathed deeply.

"Stop it." I elbowed him in the ribs. "You're rude."

We followed her surreptitiously to the front door of the library. She went outside and stood by the curb as if waiting for a ride. I pretended to study the bulletin board, and couldn't help but notice the red, white, and blue trimmed poster with Governor Cobb's jovial facade plastered front and center. I snickered. The poster extolled the entertainment value and altruism of playing the South Carolina Education Lottery.

"You didn't give her my name," Duncan said with an air of injury. "And you *should* have told her she was mature."

"*What* are you talking about? Anyway, *her* name is Irina Grigorenko."

"How do you know?"

"Name tag, silly."

Irina seemed to be occupied with an incoming text when a burly man approached her and jerked a black sack over her head. She screamed and dropped her bag. A midnight blue van appeared out of nowhere. Another man joined the burly one and they wrestled her into the van and then raced away.

Duncan and I didn't need to discuss. We had to help her. We bolted from the library. He slid his hand down the rail and grabbed her bag, and I jumped on my bicycle.

Duncan fiddled with his bike lock. "Darn, I can't get the combination."

"Get on."

"What?"

"Get on my bike. Handlebars. Feet on the pegs."

"You're crazy," he said, inching his butt up while I held still. I pedaled us down the middle of the road, weaving between cars, but I couldn't see the van.

Duncan tilted his head back, sniffed the warm, humid air, and shouted, "Left. Turn left!"

I leaned the bike over, cut in front of a sporty, squealing Mazda, jumped the curb, dodged pedestrians, and dropped back onto the road, finishing with a 360-degree sliding spin on

my rear tire.

"I didn't mean then, smarty!" Duncan shouted, breathing hard and still on the handlebars. "I meant at the stoplight! You're going to kill us."

"Listen, Bud, you're not going to die on a mountain bike with this girl. Besides, you've got the balance of an Olympian. Now where?"

He took another sniff and said, "Cross the bridge."

The Woods Memorial Bridge arched us over the Beaufort River, the openness and height bringing a refreshing breeze. We rode and rode, keeping in the bike lane now. Duncan directed a right turn and a left. The trail got colder until it took us outside Beaufort proper and left us standing by the road, not knowing where to go next.

Ahead, a few miles east, was the end of South Carolina and the frontier of the Atlantic Ocean, and between it and us, water, stinky tidal flats, barrier islands, and fragrant pine-covered hammocks. Running north and south before us stretched a wide river, and on its western shore where we stood, ran rows of elegant summer homes.

"The scent ends here," Duncan said. "The van was a 2007 Ford Econoline. You won't believe me, but every car's exhaust smells unique."

"Given our family talents, Duncan, I believe."

He had been wearing the blonde's bag around his neck, and he removed it, stuck his nose inside, and filled his lungs with its atmospheric contents.

"Strengthening her impression," he said.

"Oh?"

He squinted toward me through his lenses with a dirty look, which I ignored, then he sniffed the air several times. He gazed south. "She's down there."

We climbed back onto my bike and took the access road running behind the houses. At last we reached a dead end, a black gate, and one more house beyond. The property was surrounded by a heavy iron fence. Duncan dismounted and fell face down onto the pavement.

"You alright?" I asked.

He grunted as he creaked to his feet, then brushed his palms together to dislodge the tiny embedded rocks. "Okay. She's inside a house—the scent is fading. She's petrified. This is not her home."

"No kidding," I said. "It's the Governor's summer mansion. There's a sign saying so. Wide, lush lawns. A fountain. White columns. With a titanic yacht at the dock! What are you doing?"

"Speed dialing a taxi."

"You take a taxi. I'm riding back," I said and pushed off.

"We're not leaving. We need to rescue her."

"Here? You were *delusional* for wanting to meet her." At this point I circled back and rode tight loops around Duncan while he held his phone to his ear.

"She needs our help. Now."

"Call the police, not a taxi."

"The Governor? The police are probably in the scheme."

"Okay. You asked for it."

I had already noticed how to scale the fence, so without a pause, I headed toward the bin-sized green electrical box and jumped the bike on top.

"Wait!" Duncan called.

A couple hops, and then another jump with a 90-degree turn, and I was on the fence's top flat edge.

"I've got a *better* idea," Duncan sang out.

I rode along the fence for 30 meters until I came to a cluster of trees and jumped the bike down on the other side. I thought the trees would give cover, but a red ATV was already speeding in my direction, the driver and his pal glowering. No problem. I started for the house and the ATV made a wide arc and followed. He was on my tail, zigging back and forth and pressing tracks into the thick grass. I scanned ahead and found the perfect tree surrounded by a mulched bed. Getting up speed, I aimed straight for it, the ATV still right behind. My little maneuver in the mulch kicked up a dust cloud. I struck the tree hard, the bike and I zoomed up several meters, hit the

upcurved branch, flipped, and completed a loop to the ground. The ATV and its blinded occupants smashed into the tree trunk.

Poor tree. Seriously.

Now for the house, its vast, complicated roof an untrammeled, never-before-explored bike park festooned with dormers and a widow's walk. An upstairs window was open. I jumped onto a banister for the handicapped ramp, then to the wooden fence around the pool, rode on top the length of the pool, then, gathering myself, concentrated with all my might, and jumped onto the roof. Easy. Just then a text message rang in. Duncan.

W*hat you doing, crazy?* He always speaks his texts.

rescue ur girl

Not that way!

i can get her out

"Come down, bitch!" A couple security guys in green golf shirts now stood below me, looking up.

"Don't 'bitch' me, you…" and the rest of what I yelled with my ample vocabulary seemed to so shock the southerly breeze that she sucked in her breath.

Duncan texting: *Taxi coming. Draw beasts to back. Stall.*

Me: *why*

I rode to a ridgeline and crossed over. A half minute later, green shirts collected on the ground in back, only they comprised a platoon by now and carried guns. Two others were inching toward me on the roof. The front gate had opened, and the taxi was cruising in. He sure arrived fast. I pedaled around trying a few quick runs across roof hips and valleys and keeping out of the goons' reach. Up close, those guys didn't look like employees of a governor. More like dumbbell-jerking gangstas.

Duncan: *Got her. Go. Go.*

Huh? Well, okay. Yeah. I rode to the highest peak and scanned the scene until a gangsta creeping near reached out like a zombie, and I lifted my feet to start a long run. Down, down, and up, finding air. Double forward flip. Land on back

tire and recover. Jump across to a garage, then the roofs of one, two, three limos and one black SUV, then to the ground. Hear the cracking of gunfire and swerve to dodge bullets left and right, smack into one of the goons who tried to grab me, and I finally sprint out the open gate. You'd appreciate the beauty and gracefulness. I only wished I'd brought my MoJoe camera. Left it at the library, along with our backpacks and laptops.

Duncan was waiting by the taxi. "What took you? Mosquitoes are driving me bonkers. Gimme your lock."

"Why?"

"Just give it."

I did. He slapped at himself and waved the taxi forward, its trunk lifting open. The blonde in the front passenger side was biting her thumbs and glancing toward the house.

One of the roof-dented limos arrived as the gate closed. Duncan leaped to lock the gate to the post with my cable. Or, he thought so. He had locked the gate to itself.

"Alright," he said cheerfully. "They can't follow."

A gangsta exploded from each side of the limo and drew weapons, but must have received orders via their earpieces, because they reholstered and waited for the gate to reopen, grimacing like fools.

I fixed the lock placement without Duncan or the gangstas noticing. The gate's motor engaged and promptly jammed. The gangstas lost their grins, threw themselves at the gate, and shook it. One started climbing. I ran and tossed my bike into the trunk, which wouldn't close all the way, and I scrambled into the taxi.

"This is Irina," Duncan beside me said, beaming with pride.

"We've already met, you know." The Russian accent again.

"Where to?" the taxi driver said, saucer-eyed and gasping. "Shouldn't we hurry?"

We called for an emergency family conference.

Duncan, Grandma Middleton, Uncle Al, and Irina and I gathered that evening around the walnut table within the humongous porch of our house on the 'Ranch'. In the fading evening light, the view overlooked an emerald pasture like a wide sea broken by archipelagos of trees. Duncan, seated next to Uncle Al, kept screwing up his face and shuddering as he no doubt smelled a parade of diverse stenches wafting through the screens—smells undetectable to the rest of Earth's entire human population.

The spring evening's coolness felt good. Uncle Al lowered his vacant gaze from the ceiling and rose for courtesy's sake when Irina and Grandma shuffled out to us, each bearing a tray, one loaded with iced tea and the other a raspberry dessert.

"Ah, just what I needed." Uncle Al rubbed his belly and sat back down as Irina served him. "I'll take three of those tiny dishes, if you don't mind."

"The tea is jasmine buds wrapped in green tea leaves," Irina said.

"And she made the dessert, too, from scratch," Grandma said, scooting her rocking chair forward to the table. "We are friends already. Another daughter."

I took my snack to a corner to watch the night coming on.

Irina had told us her basic story on the way home, but to decide what to do about the kidnapping, we needed a fuller account, Uncle Al said.

"I was so scared," Irina began. "I remembered the stories my father told of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Many of my relatives disappeared in the Gulag. A few returned. I felt like I was living their experience."

"What happened at the Governor's?" Uncle Al asked.

"They told me to take a bath, and they gave me some lovely clothes. What I'm wearing."

I wouldn't call a black evening gown designed in Milan and a cashmere sweater "lovely," but then I wear Goodwill for everyday and REI for fancy occasions.

Uncle Al continued. "Then what?"

"A fretful man, not one of the thugs, came and told me they had made a horrible mistake. He said it was the Governor's son's birthday, and the abduction was a joke. They mistook me for the son's girlfriend."

"Bullcrap," I said.

"The man told me the girlfriend knew about a surprise, but not exactly what. He apologized repeatedly and gave me $500 'for my trouble'. But I had to sign a statement saying I was well treated and agreeing to not tell anyone." She covered her mouth with her hand. "Am I breaking my agreement?"

"We *saw* it, Irina," I said. "Duncan reasoned if anyone came ringing their bell and asked for her, they'd panic and let her go. The taxi driver had no idea what he was walking into and did his job superbly."

"Really?" Uncle Al said. "Why didn't they pretend ignorance?"

"Because the taxi driver told the doorman Irina had a date with a U.S. Marine Corps officer, and he and his cohort would be looking for her."

"Good thinking, Duncan," Uncle Al said.

Duncan turned to Irina. "Uncle Al is the thinker. He performs complex math in his head while long-haul driving."

Uncle Al chuckled. "Keeps me awake. Some people, like Grandma, work crossword puzzles."

Thus far, Grandma had been sitting like a motionless panda bear with either a faint frown or smile, depending. She was now smiling. "Crosswords are easy. Your math is too easy, Al. For a real knotty problem, give me a jigsaw puzzle and a time limit."

Grandma wasn't kidding. If the question was about a fact, any fact, even a future one, she always guessed right, which is how she won the lottery and bought the Ranch.

After she and Grandpa Middleton married, he threw their money at lottery tickets and never won more than a few dollars. He never let her pick numbers. He never followed her advice on anything, and they lived in poverty. So, the day after his funeral, Grandma bought a ticket and won the $251 million

(net) jackpot. We grandkids always knew her ability because she was a killer at Jeopardy. Odd thing is, she never wonders why. She only says in her innocent granny voice, "I let my mind go blank and say the first thing that pops into my head."

Uncle Al won't let her buy any more tickets because that would arouse suspicion. She doesn't care, because she's richer than she ever dreamed possible and living with me and Duncan in our big house. Big. Fifty thousand square feet on a hundred rolling acres northwest of Beaufort…

"Why are you making a face, Duncan?" I asked, seeing him wrinkling his nose.

"Someone pooted."

Everyone glanced around for a clue to the guilty party.

"Probably upwind a mile away," I said.

He sniffed. "Was a horse."

"I think," Uncle Al said, moving on. "I think maybe we should leave this kidnapping matter alone. It was a practical joke gone awry. It's not possible the Governor is mixed up in such an unthinkable business. He's a leading candidate for President."

Irina suddenly burst into tears, and Grandma frowned like when my parents died in the motorcycle accident. When Irina recovered her voice, she asked, "What do you think, Mrs. Middleton? Was it a joke?"

Grandma closed her eyes, and she wasn't only frowning now. Tears flowed down her cheeks, too. She opened her eyes and blinked rapidly. "I guess it was… and I blush to say the words, the Governor's people wanted you for a sex slave. They expected to make a lot of money. Your abductors meant to sell you."

We were stunned. Grandma's guesses were as good as Gospel. Were better than trial by jury. Were almost as good as God Himself speaking in an audible voice. Were as good as the founder's original intentions for the Constitution.

At this juncture, I was happy Uncle Al was present. He was the only one with the brain power to guide us. "What is it about you, Irina?" he asked. "They don't pick women at

random."

Irina stared ahead. Grandma's face was working with emotion. Irina sighed and said, "My parents moved back to Russia. I'm here alone. The other night at a club, I met a young man. He asked me questions. I trusted him. He seemed kind and didn't make improper advances. I was looking forward to seeing him again—he was supposed to meet me after work today. He talked about marriage and told me about his family, that they were religious, you know. I confided in him that I was chaste, you know. That I believe in waiting for marriage. He agreed."

Crap. He had interrogated her to see if she was a virgin because they command high prices. We all knew.

Uncle Al said, "Okay then. You should live here with Grandma. She has plenty of room. Is that okay with you, Grandma?"

Grandma nodded. "We'd love to have you. My house feels so empty. I should have bought something smaller."

"I can cook," Irina said. "What *will* we do next?"

We all thought for awhile, then Duncan said that since going to the police was iffy, we might get his father involved, a Marine Corps Colonel who worked at the air base in Beaufort. Uncle Al suggested that we go to the press, the state legislative leaders, and the Attorney General.

"If they abducted me," Irina said, "surely other girls have been kidnapped too, and we must do something swiftly. What do you think, Grandma?"

Grandma closed her eyes, opened them, and said, "Y'all are part wrong. But we can't act until after the Easter Reunion."

➳

Duncan and I couldn't wait. All we could think of was the poor girls trapped in the pervert Governor's sordid sex slave network. So we and a half-dozen school friends cooked up an idea. We secretly bought poster board, brushes, paint, and wooden lath and made signs including ripped-off pictures of the Guv from his lottery propaganda. Then on a stormy

afternoon, we rode bikes to his mansion and stood outside the gate.

Our soggy signs said,

"Stop Sex Traffic Now!"
"Cobb is a Crook"
"Free the Girls!"
"Arrest Cobb"
"Kidnapping is Krime"

It was cheesy, but we were serious. We had sent out press releases and called reporters, but no one believed us, and if they did, based on the last election coverage, they probably were insiders and would suppress the truth. It also could have been the deluge of rain. In short, no reporters showed up.

State patrol showed up. An officer who'd peel paint with his fiery glare, strutted from his cruiser, water dripping from his hat's brim.

"May I see your permit?" he said.

Duncan handed the officer a damp, pocket-sized edition of the Bill of Rights and said, "The First Amendment."

"Hilarious," the officer said without the trace of a smile. "Do your parents know you're here?"

"My parents are dead," I said. "Do your mommy and daddy know you're harassing an orphan and protecting a corrupt Governor?"

His face didn't even twitch. All he said was, "Your parents or guardians will be upset when you all are arrested for protesting without a permit and when they get sued for slander. They'll lose custody and you'll land in the foster care system."

That was a low blow. But we knew he was bluffing.

Right then, the officer received a call on his cell phone. He walked away. A minute later, he returned. "How long will you stay?" he asked.

"Until dark."

"I'll just wait here so you don't trespass again."

And that's what he did. We knew then he was one of the pawns… *prawns* in the Governor's sordid gumbo. We also

knew that whoever mattered knew we knew the truth. And that had to have scared them. We hoped so. It scared us, too.

On Monday after a government agent called to threaten Grandma with child protective services, our amazing grandmother told us she wasn't worried and promised to include us in her plan. "I understand your impatience, dear," she said. "Waiting hurts me, too."

If Grandma showed warm grace about our protest, Duncan's Marine Corps dad displayed pallid anger. Duncan lived at Grandma's house because he and his dad didn't get along so well, and when the Colonel rushed over after work, he brought his personal, command-presence aerial bombardment. I'm sure he didn't know he shouted loud enough for me to hear through the solid oak parlor doors.

"What are you trying to prove with your shenanigans?"

I couldn't hear Duncan, but I guess he explained the situation.

"I get it," the Colonel boomed, "but waving signs won't do a bit of good. It draws attention to yourself."

We had to try. That's what I think Duncan would say.

"Okay. If you want to help the world, follow my example."

But I want to be a doctor. Yep. He'd say that.

"I'm enrolling you in a military academy tomorrow."

But I don't want to leave my friends. I like living at Grandma Middleton's.

"That's the problem, isn't it? Hanging out with this eccentric family."

I'm one of them.

"You should be living with me."

You don't have a real home.

"That hurts. I don't have money and a massive house."

Hmm. I'm not sure how Duncan would reply here.

"I'm not making *that* mistake again," the Colonel said. "Your mother had the power to hypnotize people? And she never knew? Bull. I *thought* I was head over heels in love, but

it turns out I was bamboozled."

Same thing, in my opinion. When she was my age, as the story goes, Duncan's mom would walk up to men and say, "Give me your money," and they did, happily, eyes twinkling. This was before Grandma won the lottery. Duncan's mom and dad married young, and after he was born, she ran away to New Mexico to start a commune.

Was Duncan suggesting his dad remarry?

"She's Russian?"

I knew it! Duncan probably said he knows by their scents that Irina and his dad are a biological match.

After that last question, it was quiet for a long while. Apparently, Duncan was telling his dad how sweet and beautiful Irina was. I pressed my ear to the door. I could hear Duncan's soft wah, wah, wah, but no consonants.

"Stop." The Colonel spoke in a normal volume now, but I still heard him say, "Graduate from high school, pick any college, and enroll in ROTC. Once you qualify as an officer, the Marine Corps will hone your skills. Or, we'll skip college and give you an individualized training program. We need you to fight terrorism, Duncan."

"To Hell with military school! To Hell with ROTC!"

I heard *that*. I backed away from the door and assumed a demure posture. Hands folded in front, head down, but watching covertly.

The parlor doors flew open, Duncan's father frowned, marched to the main entrance of the mansion, and I'm sure he didn't know he slammed the decorative door so hard half its windows cracked.

Duncan snuffled a couple times and brushed past me up to his room.

Easter Reunion at the Ranch. The highlight of every year.

You might think it boring, but not so. Not with our weird family, but even more fun were the new people, the Lottery Kin. Ever since Grandma won, relatives by the score pop out of the woodwork. The peculiar thing is, most are real, or

adopted. My job was to scout them and sign them up on the giant Family Tree in the foyer. Grandma never lets me turn anyone away, not even lying freeloaders. We wouldn't give away money, but we served heaping platters of grilled seafood delivered fresh from the Gay Fish Company (an old family name) and hauled iced tea in buckets. All free and as much as anyone wanted. We filled every room of the mansion with overnight guests and even had a large encampment down by the fishing pond. Portajohns, electric hookups, a rented big-top tent, and live entertainment every night, and a sunrise worship service on Easter morn.

Rain had washed the sky clean and left us with faultless weather. More strangers than usual came this year. Oddly, some of them edged away from me. They kept away from everyone. I told Uncle Al, and he said he'd look out for trouble.

An hour before lunch on Saturday, and I had already sent a couple dozen distant cousins-to-the-9th-degree to the genealogy station when someone caught my eye. He seemed to be in his mid-thirties, and might have been a movie star except for the naked expression of skepticism planted on his face. Like, he really didn't want to be here. I rode up on my bike, noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and asked, "Who are you?"

He smiled in a way that made my stomach flutter and said, "I'm looking for someone called 'Grandma'. Grandma Middleton." His voice sounded familiar.

"Oh, she's busy now with the jigsaw puzzle races. You couldn't pull her away with a— How can I help you?"

He looked at me askance.

"Believe me. I represent Grandma. Whatever your business, you deal with me."

"Okay," he said, but I think he was humoring me. "Grandma… Is she *your* grandmother?"

"You may safely assume."

"Let's talk somewhere private."

"Then, this time of day, this weekend, that would be…

nowhere. A bathroom."

He cleared his throat.

"Alright. Do you ride? I can get you a bike."

"How about if we sit in my car?"

This creeped me out. I was thinking of Irina's horrible experience. "Let's sit *on* your car. Where is it?"

"Never mind. Let's walk."

He walked. I rode.

"Please, let me start over. My name is Jonathan T. Barron, and I'm a host of a nationally syndicated radio program. I—"

"Oh!" I interrupted, "JTB. Grandma is a huge fan-girl of yours. I heard about that wild skirmish in western North Carolina. The tree monsters. You were in the middle of it all."

"Mostly as a spectator."

I lowered my voice to ask, "Are you here to investigate the sex trafficking?"

"The what?" He turned beet red.

Interesting. "Umm. Why *are* you here?"

"Your grandmother says she has a grandson who sees with his nose. I mean, he has the sense of smell superior to a bloodhound."

"That's not so special," I said, probably pouting. "Everyone in our family, I mean, who is really related, has an ability."

"Such as?"

"Hey, let me introduce you."

I had by then figured out Grandma's scheme. Lure JTB in and recruit him to help take down the Governor. So, I organized the tour for the best effect. First, Uncle Sharp, who excels at horseshoes. Never misses. The only excitement is from how far away, or how high, or how many spins and twists. Continuous clanking coming from that corner. Roars and cheers arising from the spectators.

Next, the guy who hears voices. As he puts it, sound disturbs the foundation of language and releases "meaning." A door squeak tells him it's time to pick up the mail. If the door keeps squeaking, he hears a lecture on economic socialism.

I've been told "water" tinkling into the commode really bothers him. He also understands animals, because their sounds connect to real meaning. 'What crows talk about!' he says. Mockingbirds drive him insane. Grandma spent a fortune on him for psychiatrists until Uncle Al just said to wear hearing protection and learn sign language. I call him Earmuff Guy."

We watched him signing by himself in a slow, martial-arts-like dance.

"You *sure* he's not crazy?" JTB said.

I shrugged.

"I could do a month of programs here already."

Gone was his trademarked skepticism. That was nice, though I thought he was only being polite, and I said, "Then that's enough introductions for now." I next showed JTB the rope swings, the swimming pool, the horse barn, and the auction tent where people sold stuff for charity.

"Where's your relative with the extraordinary sense of smell?"

"Gotcha. He's indisposed. His father's here, *again*. I'll show you, and it'll explain."

We walked behind the skateboard park, where the bike track was. Under a cluster of pecan trees at a picnic table sat Duncan's father straight up in his dress Marine Corps uniform. Duncan was standing nearby, his back to his dad. Not a happy picture. Duncan had his glasses off and was wiping his eyes.

"A family crisis?"

"Umm. His dad believes Duncan's abilities would be a phenomenal asset to defeating our enemies. But Duncan believes he can learn to diagnose disease and save thousands of lives. That's been his dream."

"Admirable."

A phalanx of helicopters chugged high overhead, interrupting our conversation, a common thing near the airbase. As JTB looked up, his knees wobbled and he grabbed my handlebar to steady himself. I glanced at him, his face pale and clammy.

When the airships were mostly gone, I sighed big.

"What's that about?" JTB asked, still pale, but steadier.

"A dream of mine. Are you alright? My dad sneezed whenever he looked up."

"I served in Afghanistan. The helos brought back a memory."

Just then Duncan's father turned, nodded to JTB, and walked away toward the parking area.

"Does he know you?" I asked.

"Maybe. Ask Duncan if I can talk with him."

"Not a good time."

"I need to know if he'll let me interview him for my radio program."

"Gotcha. You asked for it."

I went to Duncan and gave him a hug, after which I presented JTB's question. He said exactly what I thought he would before he stormed away.

"And that was…? JTB asked.

"He said you can go straight to Hades, but I wouldn't take him too literally."

We watched Duncan for a moment. He kicked at a stray soccer ball and missed.

"His father enrolled him in a private high school, starting next fall. Up east."

"I've wasted a trip, then." His face scrunched up, maybe in disappointment. Then he brightened with hopefulness. "Unless you have a special ability?"

"Umm. You're not quite done. You have to meet Grandma Middleton." We bee-lined for the house and the game wing. I leaned my bicycle against a sweetgum tree in front.

"Your bike looks new," JTB said. "Sturdy, thick tires."

"It's a pro-grade mountain stunt model, custom geared for road riding. I've had it four years."

"But not a scratch or nick."

"I never crash and never will."

"Is this your unusual gift?"

I scoffed and walked through the front doorway. We

moved along passageways into the ballroom where the chess tournament was. Irina and Uncle Al were battling it out in the center of the room. Irina had said she was trained from a child, but Uncle Al was a purebred natural, and so it seemed an even match.

JTB circled through the room and returned. "The girl's sharp," he whispered.

As I told JTB about Irina's story, you could see him forgetting the nonsense about *our* family. I mean, we had our kinks, I said, but otherwise we were normal. Irina was the needy one, and not her so much, but those girls held in captivity.

"All those like Irina who won't be rescued unless you help us bust this evil crime ring," I said. "This is real. See Irina? How many girls like her are enslaved?"

He adopted a poker face, and the sounds of the chess games pushed into hearing. Click of a piece being moved. Slap on a chess clock. The word "Check." I didn't know what was playing in his head, but the longer JTB pondered, the more likely he was to join our team. When he smiled to himself, I knew I had him hooked. He glanced at me and said, "I'm ready to meet Grandma."

Thought so. His conscience speaking.

We went next door to the jigsaw puzzle room. If the chess tournament was intense and ponderous, this space was light-hearted and busy. The room was full of wide tables. Each contestant kept a talkative assistant who organized the 5000 pieces, with the contestant studying the box, picking a piece up and turning it, sometimes fitting it into place and sometimes exchanging it for another. For fairness, everyone worked on identical puzzles, the image a painting of a young mother who was hand sewing, with her rosy-cheeked daughter leaning onto the mother's lap.

Hands moved fast.

"Grandma's in the pink and green dress."

"Are jigsaw puzzles her gift?"

"Heavens, no. Grandma always guesses right about

everything. She probably guessed you'd be here now. But you can't guess at jigsaw puzzles and that's why she loves them."

Grandma looked up at JTB and suddenly grinned. She abandoned her puzzle, leaving her stunned assistant gaping, and came over to us. "So pleased to meet you in person, Mr. Jonathan T. Barron, when I have only heard your voice. She stood up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear.

JTB sighed and nodded.

"Do you mind, dear?" she said to me. "I need to talk with Mr. Barron. Anyway, you have your upcoming bike workshop with the children."

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After the square dance that evening, everyone went to bed early. Grandma had invoked a strict quiet time because she wanted everyone to be fresh for the sunrise service.

The music on Sunday morning under the big tent was awe-inspiring. A couple of local churches joined us, and they brought a combined adult and children's choir, with handbells and two keyboards going at once. If it didn't raise the dead, it did raise goosebumps. I was transported. The sermon, however, was the usual nap inducer, something about how even though the apostles faced a grisly martyrdom, none confessed the resurrection to be a sham. How a preacher can make such a fascinating topic boring was a true miracle.

The preacher pitched a half-hearted altar call, and as an organ softly wandered from chord to chord, a handful of worshipers started forward. The preacher met them in front of the stage. The whispering, kneeling, and praying wound down, and the preacher remounted the steps. A few strangers had arrived late, and one of them, a pale, pockmarked woman wearing slacks and a polo shirt, followed him to the podium.

The preacher leaned into the mic. "After the service—"

But the stranger cut him off, saying, "Excuse me, may I?" and gestured to the microphone.

The bewildered preacher stepped aside.

The stranger pulled a sheaf of papers from her back pocket. "Good morning, everyone. I hate to disrupt your party,

but I'm with the Department of Health and Environmental Control. My helpers and I found twenty-three violations on the property this weekend. For example, major Portaloo spillage next to the outdoor kitchen and dining pavilion, with potential food contamination—your lunch, in fact. Also, your hosts failed to secure permits. Therefore, for your safety, I'm afraid we're closing the event. We've closed the swimming pool, too. You all will have to leave. Sorry to disrupt your day, but someone might be hurt, particularly a child. Pastor, I'll turn the proceedings back to you."

I wanted to bellow it was a truckload of bullcrap, but the preacher raised his hand and mumbled a benediction. When he pronounced the final Amen, everyone yakked at once, while the pale, pockmarked stranger, still at the microphone, boomed, "Please go to your cars now and leave!"

The other strangers, who reminded me of the Governor's gangsters, handed out flyers. I grabbed one, a copy of a court order signed by a judge.

The visitors pretty much herded to the parking lots, anxious to be in the best position for racing to the restaurants, since they couldn't eat the mountains of fried chicken and potato salad waiting at the pavilion.

I ran up to Uncle Al and asked, "What'll we do?"

Duncan ran up, his eyes smoldering behind his glasses. "Let's fight," he said.

Uncle Al stepped to the microphone, but the cord had been unplugged. He cupped his hands. "They can't make you leave!"

Not many heard him. Duncan reconnected the power, but too late, and I started calling the guest's phone numbers we had. Uncle Al dashed to the house in his electric cart. We tried to convince people to stay, but the goons worked harder to intimidate them. They swarmed the place and taped off everything. By the time the dust settled, the only guests remaining were relatives with Monday flights from Charleston, Duncan's and my friends whose parents weren't there, and JTB, who had kept in the background during this

whole mess. We gathered at a shady corner of the dining pavilion to eat of the lonely food. The goons traipsing over the property couldn't care less if we ate anything "contaminated." The portable outhouses that had mysteriously tipped over were two hundred yards downwind. JTB and Earmuff Guy attempted to converse, which looked awkward because JTB didn't know sign language.

Grandma said, and everyone agreed, that the Governor was behind this harassment.

"There's nothing we can do till tomorrow morning," Uncle Al said, "but at least we should protest to the supervisor."

"She's at the swimming pool," Duncan said. "I already told her what *I* think."

"Good, son," Uncle Al said. He patted his mouth with a napkin, then drove away with Grandma in the electric cart. Duncan, me, and our five friends rode our bikes. JTB, Irina, Earmuff Guy, and a few others hurried behind on foot.

We kids passed the cart and arrived first. So many more goons than we expected. We were outnumbered three to one. Many of them were lounging at the café tables under umbrellas, with heaping plates of food before them. When we rode up, a few looked frantically for a place to hide the guilty booty. One laughed and stuffed a forkful into his mouth. Closing the swimming pool really irked me—I had worn my two-piece bathing suit under my church clothes. To cool off and show I wouldn't let them ruin our day, I stripped off my blouse and skirt, climbed the ladder to the board, paced three steps, bounced, and swan-dived into the pool. The goons at the café tables cheered when I surfaced, and one wolf-whistled when I climbed out dripping wet, and joined my friends. I was tempted to flip the goons the bird.

The Supervisor walked toward us and eyed me closely. I plugged one nostril and blew the other, then wiped my nose with the back of my hand. She shuddered, glanced aside, and nodded to a couple goons who were standing beside her.

They grabbed my arms. Then someone grabbed my bike.

"Let me go, you animals!" I slipped from their grasp, and

they grabbed me around the waist and neck.

"Hey!" someone shouted.

"Give my bike back!"

"What the Hell are you doing?" someone else shouted.

"Get off her!"

Yelling, punching, and kicking, our friends attacked, but the goons easily pushed them down. Then a goon threw my bike into a nearby midnight blue van. The more I struggled, the more they tightened their grips until it hurt.

I howled, "Let me go. Give me my bike back!"

Uncle Al and Grandma wheeled up, Al with his shaking fists clenched like he might throw a pile-driver punch. I bumped a gun inside one of my captor's belts and really became afraid.

Grandma said, "Let me handle this, Al, please."

Like a queen condescending to a common bully, Grandma advanced toward the Supervisor.

"Why are you holding my granddaughter?"

"We have a court order, ma'am. You're not the legal guardian of this child."

"Is that so? I'm her closest living relative."

"It's only my opinion, ma'am, but from the look of this place, the child hasn't been properly looked after. Twenty-three health and safety violations. We have affidavits swearing she's been running loose unsupervised in the streets. The girl will be appointed a *guardian ad litem* who will protect her interests. You'll be able to petition the court to gain guardianship. Until then, she'll be placed in foster care."

"You mean, jail," I said. "I want my bicycle."

"Listen, Grandma." Here, the Supervisor spoke no louder than Grandma Middleton and I could hear. Her pockmarks burned red in her whitewashed face. "Your grandchild won't be harmed as long as you keep away from the Governor's business. Stay out of politics. Otherwise, no telling what could happen." The woman leaned forward and whispered. "She's insurance."

The stragglers had arrived in the middle of this menacing

threat. JTB hung back, but Earmuff Guy waded into our midst. The two goons pulled me toward their van and I screamed.

Other goons drew their pistols. All my family stood frozen and helpless. All but Earmuff Guy, but he wasn't wearing his earmuffs. He began wailing, waving his arms, and babbling incoherently. The air seemed full of the noise of bubbling, boiling mud pots like at Yellowstone Park. Earmuff stopped screaming and swung around wildly, listening.

"The vampires will come," he croaked at last, then he spun in a circle, faster and faster, emitting a fierce buzzing noise.

"I've seen enough," the Supervisor said, unfazed. "Let's go, men. Stick her in the van. If anyone resists, cuff them and toss them in with her."

I looked around for Duncan because it would be like him to get arrested, but he was gone. The bubbling mud pots grew in intensity, and Earmuff's buzzing rose in pitch to merge with a whine at the upper limit of human hearing. It settled over us like a hovering, throbbing, flying saucer, numbing the senses.

Everyone was gazing up.

An opaque cloud that jittered like static on an old TV screen descended. Mosquitoes, and they swathed my captors in an instant as if the men had sprouted fur coats. Now *they* were screaming, and slapping themselves.

A few insects bumped into me, and they were in my eyes and ears. Suddenly free, I zipped away, intending to hide in our secret, prohibition-era wine closet, but as I approached the house, two goons jumped from behind a van, grabbed me, and yanked a bag over my head. I broke loose, screamed, kicked, and punched. They snatched me again and tie-strapped my arms, and I felt a sharp prick in my thigh. Then I was roughly tossed into the van. The door slammed and I faded from consciousness.

Apparently, Earmuff's communication with nature was two-way.

I'm upset because I had planned to spend the day playing freeze tag in the water with my friends, then keep-away, and

sharks and minnows, then there was supposed to be a dive competition and the belly flop contest. I'd ride up the ladder and jump the high dive with a bike. Duncan would swim laps, then sit in the shade and listen to a book on tape. A perfect day spoiled. Worst of all, I'll never see my lucky bicycle again. Oh, my gosh, I've been kidnapped!

I opened my eyes and blinked. I was lying on a couch, groggy, with a thin blanket over me. It took a second for my eyes to focus.

"You're the smart little vixen, aren't you?" I swiveled my head toward the speaker, and it was the supervisor woman who had been wearing slacks and a polo shirt. Only now, she had on a business suit. New pimples covered her face, which had been slathered in pink calamine lotion. Ah, the mosquitoes.

I tried to sit up, but my feet and wrists were strapped. My heart rate jumped, and I started panting.

"No one's going to touch you, Carlson. What's wrong with your parents, giving you a name so ugly? No one will touch you, but you might see and hear something you won't like. Now, will you behave? Can we remove the restraints?"

"I'm not promising anything."

"There, at least the fox isn't snapping her teeth." She nodded to two gangsters, who cut me loose.

I sat up, rubbed my wrists, and looked around. The room was strange and formal. Big, but not as big as my bedroom. I was only wearing my bathing suit, it was still damp and I felt cold. The blanket hadn't helped. From my first glances, I guessed I was in the Governor's summer mansion, but that couldn't be right because everything was too modern. I wrapped the blanket around me, went to the window, only to see the sun setting between two looming skyscrapers. This was not coastal South Carolina.

"Atlanta, Carlson. Governor Cobbs is announcing his presidential campaign tonight, and we have some wealthy guests attending the gala here at the Hotel U. The other girls arrived by bus yesterday. I'll have work for you, too. Easy,

light work." Her sickening smile said she was enjoying the thought.

"I need to pee," I said. "I'm hungry."

The door opened and a pretty girl lilted in carrying a long decorative box. She set the box on a counter, and turning to leave, gave me a quick wink. Not a mischievous wink, but conveying solidarity, like she knew me already.

The Supervisor opened the box and removed a deep blue sleeveless dress—my size, if not a tad small—clearly intended to be alluring. "Take your shower and put on the dress. Oh, and there's supposed to be underthings." She glanced at a goon, who hurried out. "Your first guest may arrive soon."

I'm sure I showed all kinds of alarm.

"Don't worry, nobody will touch you. They'll be creepy, but you'll get used to it. This type of client likes to talk."

"I might say a few things he won't like," I said, already composing new insults.

"Oh, the clients especially love this. You should realize that if your family doesn't keep their traps shut about the Governor, it won't be polite, gentleman voyeurs, but hungry, urgent men with money. Lots of them. Lots of money. Tonight is to let y'all know we mean business."

"I want to talk with Grandma." The fear in my voice and tears in my eyes weren't acted.

"We're talking with her. She knows what's happening." She leaned back and looked me up and down. "As cute as you are in your bathing suit and blanket, it's not quite appropriate for tonight. So, shower. Brush your hair. Wear the dress. We'll have a beautician see you within the hour." She and the goons left, and the door shut with a mechanical jolt.

I looked out the window again—no escape there, twenty stories high and the windows wouldn't open. Adjoining this room was another room with a king-sized bed. Everything in this place was expensive. Leather upholstery. Boutique furniture, like pieces in an art gallery. Watercolors on the walls. Hardwood floors and Persian rugs. Neon accent lights and stainless steel. Ovals and squares. A thick, hand-woven

bedcover, which I wrapped around me instead of the blanket. Sculptures of naked men and women. Faceted mirrors, like at Grandma's. A mini bar with imported distilled spirits. A solid wooden table. The refrigerator stocked with food and bottled beverages.

When I jiggled the door handle, a man outside said in a muffled voice, "Forget it, girl."

I ran to the bathroom, came back to the kitchenette and helped myself to some yogurt, almonds, and a banana.

The dress. Like a poisonous snake. Simple in design, gorgeous, but dangerous. I held it up, draping it before me in a mirror. Not bad, I thought. Surprisingly heavy, the cloth itself was exquisite, soft, and was composed of many subtle blues blended together. I almost could pretend I was a beauty.

Umm… No.

Even if it were my style, I couldn't wear the dress. I couldn't play along that far. I wouldn't give them what they wanted. I tossed the dress onto the box and then noticed a tiny folded scrap of blue paper on the floor. I opened it and read.

"HELP US, CARLSON!" it said. Then it had the number "34."

The note must have fallen from the folds of the dress.

When the door unlocked and the male beautician arrived with two goons, I was sitting on the couch, un-showered, watching television. The beautician obviously had encountered reluctance before and made only a feeble effort to tempt me.

"These genuine blue diamond earrings and pendant will be fabulous on you, honey," he said in a pinched, tenor voice. "They're my favorite. They'll just glorify your eyes."

I said nothing and continued staring at the TV.

He said, "You don't need makeup," and shrugged his shoulders. Upon leaving, he said to the guard, "Be nice, will you? After all, it's her first time."

The Supervisor stormed into the room. She didn't waste any words, but nervously fretted and steamed as the goons stripped the place of every sheet, towel, blanket, or piece of

cloth. They even tore the curtains from the windows. Lastly, they ripped the bedcover from my body. I stood there glaring.

"Okay," she said finally. "You know, your bathing suit will do fine. A visitor will be arriving soon. The Governor just finished his speech. It was a good'un."

They left me alone. I was scared. I knew Grandma would guess where I was and Uncle Al might *try* something, but I didn't know what. Our family had special gifts, but I couldn't think of anyone who had a skill that would help this situation.

Using the gorgeous dress would be better than only wearing my bathing suit, so I draped it around my hips and knotted it at the waist, sat on a chair, and waited.

If only I had my bicycle…

The waiting. Fear turned into anxiety. Anxiety turned into dread. Dread turned into horror and humiliation. Humiliation turned into panic, and I began hyperventilating. The lights dimmed, and I heard a roaring until I realized I was passing out, and strangely, I knew then I had the power to deal with these feelings. I did it all the time without thinking when I did crazy stuff on the bicycle. All I needed to do was breathe deliberately, slowly, and imagine riding. Trust my gift. I pictured gliding along my most challenging urban trail between Grandma's and school. I had ridden it a hundred times. The trail was incredibly technical. I could do it and recite Shakespeare at the same time. "Once more to the breach!"

The end of this transformation brought me to serenity, and serenity turned into compassion for the girls, and cool anger. *I'll endure this degradation for them and bust the criminal governor all to Hell. I'll bring him down from the inside.*

Yeah. All my resolution and courage melted when the lock flipped and the door opened. So much for being a hero. I ran to the bathroom, and its lock spun uselessly.

"Where *are* yooou, Carlson!" a treble voice called.

Embarrassed at my cowardice, I emerged from the bathroom. *Oh, great. The client is a woman carrying a largish bag. This is creepier than ever!* She was dressed in an evening

gown like the one around my waist. She was even wearing blue diamond earrings and a pendant. The ones the beautician showed me? Holy cow. With her were two goons wearing navy seersucker suits, one suit way too big and the other way too small. Both of the men sported shaggy beards, and they fidgeted in their shiny, matching brown and white Oxford shoes.

Despite my racing heart, I laughed.

The woman, however, was lovely and looked perfectly comfortable. "You're cute, but please put the dress on," she requested, and then smiled in a way incongruous with anything I imagined. Creep-y.

I felt an overwhelming impulse to obey her, but caught myself. "I've already made this decision."

"Mother said you knew your own mind. Then, wear these," and she pulled shorts and a camo hoodie from her bag. "We're leaving. You can't traipse around the U Hotel lobby in a bikini." Then she smiled again in her kind, totally weird way.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, a-hole."

"I don't have time to waste, feral spirit. My flight back to Albuquerque leaves at 11:05. Okay, Shady Grove, bring it in."

Shady Grove—one of the glassy-eyed bearded men—stepped into the hallway and returned wheeling a brand new, ultra high-end mountain bicycle, my own helmet dangling from the handlebars.

"Your grandmother said you'd need these. I'm Duncan's mom. I can mesmerize enough people to get us in and out, but no one knows who I am. *You*, girl, will be recognized from a distance, and I can't reach people unless they're nearby, within forty feet or so. The effect lasts five to ten minutes, but for those who stay with me for extended periods, it never wears off." Here she punched the other bearded guy really hard in the shoulder. (He didn't even flinch.) "You're on your own, Carlson. Look for the red rental van double-parked in front of the hotel."

I grinned and pulled on the hoodie and shorts.

We sidled past a real goon wearing a perfectly fitted suit and a drool-slimed tie. "Now, handsome," Duncan's mom, my aunt, said, "go soak your head in a toilet." He shambled off to obey, his brain under her influence functioning no better than scrambled eggs.

She and her escorts waited at the elevator. The elevator dinged, its door opened, and a dapper little man stepped out, followed by another mindless hulk. Did everyone around here bring apes for bodyguards?

"Put your watches, rings, and wallets in the bag," she said sweetly to the men from the elevator.

"Cheers!" Duncan's mom waved to me as the door was closing. "Good luck. Say hello to my kid for me. To Duncan."

I snapped on the helmet and threw my leg over the bike. The weight and balance felt off. I looked past the two men who stood like statues with their mouths open and saw the stairwell's sign. Twenty stories up. Fun. I wheeled toward the men and realized the little guy was probably my client. I could, I should, run him right over. Would be easy. With his brain addled, he wouldn't move. I stood on the pedals to gain power and aimed right at him. But at the last moment, conscience kicked in and I dismounted to walk by. He leered, and his eyes tracked me as I passed. At the last moment, *he* leaned out and patted my fanny, the turd. I didn't even look back, even though he howled as he lost his balance and hit the floor with a hard thud.

The dapper man's bodyguard must have regained what dim consciousness he had, because he shouted, "She's loose!"

The first turn in the stairwell gave me trouble, or the new bike did, because I scraped the wall and nearly flipped. After that, no problem. I bumped down the entire spiraling way, only dismounting to walk through a couple fire doors, including the one at the bottom that opened into a main hallway crowded with glittering people. I sprinted through, with them screaming and leaping out of the way. A parking valet waved his hand to trigger the front door to open. As I rode by, I noticed he was wearing protective headphones.

Earmuff Guy! He tipped his cap. Outside, a red van waited in the middle of the lane, its back doors wide open. I jumped the bike inside. Earmuff crawled in afterwards and pulled the doors shut.

We accelerated, and I looked around.

Here they were, my closest family! All of them. Duncan, Grandma, Uncle Al, Uncle Sharp, Irina, and even Jonathan T. Barron. They were smiling, laughing, and trying to hug me. Duncan snuffled over my hoodie like a lost and found puppy.

I burst into tears.

When I stopped crying at last, Duncan said, "It worked."

"What worked?"

"Cousin Ralph. Earmuff Guy? I figured if there was an important message for him, all I had to do was broadcast a repetitive sound."

"Oh. Gurgling mud pots?"

"Grits. I took a cordless mic and turned up the heat."

"But it didn't work. They stole my bike."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Even in the flashing, irregular illumination of passing headlights, I could see something wrong with Duncan, so I asked, "Your forehead?"

"Bruise. My usual clumsiness. Doesn't hurt. I'm sad because I can smell my mom on you. It's the closest I've been to her since she left. She's older, I know, but she hasn't changed."

Grandma had chartered a private jet and a pilot for the hop to and from Atlanta and had got permission through Duncan's dad to use the Beaufort Marine airbase, so they could move faster and get me home quicker. At the Atlanta hangar, everyone said again how glad they were that I was okay, and lined up for more hugs. Everyone but Duncan, and Cousin Earmuff, who wouldn't let anyone touch him. He twirled in a corner, wearing his valet hat and bearing a mischievous smile.

JTB waited until everyone was done. "I'm sorry you went through this," he said.

"I knew *someone* would save me."

"Yesterday, I gave you the impression that I'd help. I didn't lie, but I hoped I could be excused. But after today… After today, I'm completely in. Cousin Ralph and the eerie mosquito attack really impressed me, but your issue is far more important. I know I can make a difference."

I tried not to get lost in his eyes.

"Your Uncle Al should research if the Governor is using the foster care system as a farm program for sex slaves."

"Oh dear. I'm positive he is."

"I'm flying back home to California tonight. But I promise to drop everything and join you the instant your plan starts moving, whatever it is."

Once I nestled into a bed they made for me on the jet, I fell asleep and didn't fully wake up until morning, and found myself in my own blessed room.

Who said the wheels of justice grind slowly?

The new bike was better than mine. I mean, it featured better components, but it didn't ride the same. I wasn't sure I could perform impossible stunts like I did with mine. My old bike and I had so much history, and I didn't trust the new one.

Anyway, we were afraid the kidnapping syndicate would attack us again. We looked at the files of missing women in the region. So many girls had been in foster care when they disappeared. And I figured the number 34 on the blue note was how many girls the Governor currently held in captivity.

Grandma guessed we would be okay, but it didn't stop us from watching over our shoulders. I think Duncan's dad was watching over us, too. Even so, shadows felt deeper and more ominous. The situation improved after Uncle Sharp paid us a visit, and Duncan sniffed out an unconscious goon in our shrubbery, a horseshoe nearby. The stalker was lucky not to be strangled by a ringer.

A month later, Uncle Al finally put together a kind-of plan. Al is a master logician, and he had been studying the lottery long before Grandma won her money. On a closer examination, he found that Governor Cobb introduced a

political media blitz—TV, radio, mailers in our box—after every lottery jackpot. Every one. Also, the Governor received a flush of donations *after* the jackpot award and *before* the campaign. Studying the Governor's published itinerary, Al didn't see any corresponding increase of fundraising activity. No particular increase of events and few personal appearances. And most of the events he did throw were fake. That is, no crowds and no VIP guests.

"The conclusion is obvious," Uncle Al said. "But how to prove it?"

"Have Irina win the lottery," JTB suggested by phone.

It was easy enough. Grandma never questioned us for being inquisitive. I waited until bedtime when she needed help getting ready.

"Grandma?"

"Yes, sweetie."

"If you bought a ticket for the next Powerball lottery, what would you pick?"

"How many numbers, dear?"

"Go for broke."

"I don't know. I'm tired, but I'd say…" She closed her eyes. "14, 52, 35, 34, 9. Let's see… The red ball: 20."

I jotted them down and repeated them back.

"That's it. Is Mr. Jonathan T. Barron being helpful?"

"He'll be here next week."

"It will all work out, sweetie."

I gave a covert look, but she just snuggled into her pillow.

"Good night, Grandma." I gave her my hand, which she kissed.

"Good night, dear."

So, Irina bought the ticket and won the huge jackpot, though she'd have to split it with another winner. She signed to take it in one lump sum, and Uncle Al said he'd handle the tax forms. The check was soon ready in Columbia, the capital.

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We assured ourselves of the danger one morning as we waited at Irina's new Fripp Island villa overlooking the

Atlantic Ocean, we being Irina, and me (as chaperone to keep her company), Duncan, and JTB, who was watching from the balcony. It was the middle of summer vacation by then. We had been at the villa for a week, and I risked riding every day along the beach and into the waves on the new bicycle.

We were waiting for Governor Cobb's presidential "committee" to show up. They'd arrive anytime, maybe.

Duncan was outside somewhere, smelling the morning breezes. JTB stepped in from the balcony. The wind whipped the curtains of the sliding glass door.

I peeked out as a glorious peloton of pelicans floated overhead.

"The waves are high," JTB said. "Nice surf. Someone with binoculars was observing me. They don't seem to be hiding. That's good. I don't believe they know about the Governor's lottery business."

"We don't know, either," Irina said.

Just then, Duncan came rushing in. "They're here."

"Who?" I said.

He stuffed a pistol under a couch pillow.

A forever minute later, I answered the door. Suits, two of them, one grey and the other black, were standing at the villa's entrance. They both were sweating.

The grey suit contained a black man whose expression said he wouldn't do the talking. The black suit came with black shirt, black tie, and a black cowboy hat carried in his hand. His soft hair combed into a gentle wave made an instant impression, but it was blacker than nature and couldn't misdirect from the worn, tanned face. The only life in this person showed in his darting eyes, and then his mouth.

"Good morning. My name is Whitmire, and I'm an attorney for the South Carolina Education Lottery. We'd like to see Ms. Irina Grigorenko. May we come in?"

How could we say no?

When everyone settled into chairs, JTB, who was wearing dark glasses, said, "I speak for Miss Grigorenko. You're here to request a donation for the Governor's presidential

campaign. Miss Grigorenko has received many inquiries since she came into money, and I regret that she's turning them all down. This is an exciting time for her, and she wants to take things slowly."

Whitmire looked shocked. "I *said* we're with the Lottery. Who are you?"

They didn't know who JTB was. Excellent.

"Someone who has her *best* interest in mind."

"I see," the man said in a singsong tone, not attempting to conceal his mockery. "Is this the lady?" he asked, nodding to Irina and not to me.

At this point, the black man edged around the room and inspected everything as if he was searching for cameras and recording devices.

Duncan was sniffing and staring around blankly. He had misplaced his glasses.

"What's wrong with him?" Whitmire said.

"He's blind," I said.

"You're all very nervous," he said, looking around our circle. "You should be. Ms. Grigorenko is in an uncomfortable position. Those shadowy men lurking on the beach and in the parking lot? Your bodyguards?"

"No," JTB said.

"Ms. Grigorenko is in the U.S. illegally. The country has every right to deport her. If she were from Mexico, perhaps there wouldn't be an issue, but as is, she's in danger of being deported back to Russia. I understand that her relatives returned there? I must say, Ms. Grigorenko's illegal status puts her substantial Education Lottery winnings in jeopardy.

"The Governor has spoken personally about her situation, and he can help. We will advocate on Ms. Grigorenko's behalf to ensure she remains in the U.S., if she wishes. We can also reserve $20,000 cash for her, and grant her a full scholarship to any one of the South Carolina state universities."

"And what's the deal? What does she do in return?"

"Nothing."

"What about her lottery winnings?"

"She signs a paper releasing the winnings. We avoid an expensive, expensive for you, I might say, court proceeding."

"What happens to the funds?"

"They become available for other purposes."

"You have a contract?"

He handed JTB a sheet of paper.

"This says nothing about a scholarship."

"You're skeptical. If you wish, we'll also cover the cost of your nice villa."

Here, JTB stood up and pulled open the curtains, letting the glaring morning sunlight pour through. "You're not with the Education Lottery, Mr. Whitmire. You work for the Governor's presidential campaign. If Miss Grigorenko agrees with your terms, I have no doubt you will honor your pathetic offer, but I know that the lottery money will be disbursed to dozens if not hundreds of people, who will, in turn, make perfectly legal donations to the Governor's campaign."

JTB stopped to wait for a reaction. The minuscule hesitation on the part of Mr. Whitmire was all we needed to see. I'm sure Duncan smelled a change in Whitmire's chemistry. Heck, I could smell it. Whitmire started flibber-flabbering, but JTB didn't let him reach coherency.

"My name is Jonathan T. Barron, and I produce a radio show called Strange Days Radio. Ordinarily, I broadcast stories on the paranormal, the weird, the improbable. I'm more of a debunker than a believer, and Mr. Whitmire, you're debunked. This room is bugged better than the CIA can do it. It's my trade, sir. And though this story has nothing to do with the supernatural (here I cleared my throat), it is the oddest corruption I have ever seen. People will care."

JTB waited for another reaction. Whitmire only glanced to his partner, who was staring at his phone, checking JTB's credentials, no doubt. JTB took off his sunglasses. The partner glanced up and nodded.

"You can't prove anything," Whitmire said.

"I can speculate. It goes a long way in politics."

Whitmire was silent, thinking.

"You're an intelligent man, Mr. Whitmire. You haven't threatened to sue me for slander. I respect you for respecting me. But let me tell you something you don't know. Those men you thought were Miss Grigorenko's guards? They're her tormentors."

By the end of Irina's softly narrated tale of her abduction and our boisterous team-presentation alleging Governor Cobb being the hub of a sinister sex trafficking syndicate, Whitmire and his silent partner were shaking in anger. They said, and I could tell that Duncan, the human lie detector, believed them when they said, that they hadn't known anything about it. The black guy even spoke, saying. "This is horrible."

I forgave them for their bad costume colors.

When they were leaving, Whitmire said, "I'm not guaranteeing anything, but we'll see about these unthinkable crimes. As for our shakedown, you do what you think best. Ms. Grigorenko has nothing to worry about from us. She won the lottery, and her immigration status doesn't affect this whatsoever. We're at your mercy."

A week later, Governor Cobb shockingly withdrew from the presidential race, stating the classic, he "needed to spend more time with family." He didn't even endorse anyone.

We also read that a Mr. Whitmire of the Governor's staff had been murdered by unknown persons. Too bad, really. I felt sorry for him—for a political crook, he seemed to have a smidgen of ethics. We had played one crook against another, but as far as we could tell, the sex trafficking continued unaffected. Uncle Al said that kidnappings of young girls seemed to be picking up, and we were feeling desperate, especially Duncan. We stood ready. When and if it was right to move, things would happen fast.

It was now nearly the end of summer vacation. Duncan had been staying with his dad and volunteering at the hospital. One Sunday, he rode over to Grandma's. I met him at the front door. He dumped his bike on the lawn and grinned while bouncing up and down with excitement. "Uncle Al said we

never did confirm the Governor was running a kidnapping ring and selling girls."

"But Grandma said."

"Not everyone believes her. So, Dad did his own surveillance. Satellite imagery."

"And?"

"We're raiding the Governor's compound. We're going to stop this shit. Yeah."

"Who is we?"

"Marines. A Special Operations Team."

"You mean like Navy SEALS?"

"Some guys are here from Lejeune on a training operation, and Dad and Mr. Barron persuaded the commanding general to give them a live exercise. In their free time."

"Mr. Barron did?"

"The President okayed the mission. Apparently, they all know each other from Afghanistan. Mr. Barron was involved in some fantastical op no one will discuss. The subject has its own smell. It's how he started his paranormal investigations."

"Cool."

"And you know that jump you've always dreamed about?"

"Yeah?"

"I can smuggle you onboard the plane, but you'll have to wear a parachute. I insist."

➳

That's how I found myself stuffed into an airplane compartment and hugging an expensive, folding, carbon-fiber bike in its aerodynamic fabric case. Grandma would never give permission, so this was my only chance until I turned 18, and since it was for a good cause, I thought I'd give it a try. I have to admit, I was nervous. The danger was darkness. But I figured the Governor's house was lit well enough that I would find my landing site, a long, grassy slope ending at the water's edge.

I was wearing a radio headset that Duncan gave me. I turned down the Marines' chatter. The noise, vibration, and bounce of the aircraft were relaxing. We had to circle upward

from a distance to get the right altitude, Duncan had said. I wondered what kind of commitment he had made to talk his dad into this operation. Probably going peaceably to military school. Too bad. Duncan would fail in a rigid environment. Or, he'd be bullied because of his ability.

I didn't think of it often, but in those minutes of waiting, I wondered where our abilities came from. I mean, my skill. Lots of guys have amazing talent on a bike, but mine wasn't natural, was it?

Maybe Duncan's powers of smell were natural, but how? Genetic mutation. But Grandma's infallible guesswork? Maybe she had simply tuned into what was available to everyone. JTB had been telling me the other day about how some trees are interconnected underground. Say, if one tree is attacked by a pest, such as an insect, that tree will produce a toxin to make its sap and leaves unpalatable. But the thing is, the other nearby trees of that species will produce the same toxin, even if not attacked. Maybe the world is like that. We humans might have an underground, invisible connection to reality ready to be tapped if only we're paying attention.

I had asked Uncle Al this question once. He said that with all the bad luck in the world, there must be good luck somewhere to even the balance. Our family just happens to be the "locus" of concentrated good luck. He called it blessings. I sure hoped my luck would hold out for this jump.

My ears popped and the background chatter took a new note. I turned up the volume. The jump door had been thrown open.

"60 seconds," I heard. My cue.

I pushed open the closet and stretched my legs. The bike package was strapped to my front. Peeking around, I saw no one looking in my direction. I slowly stood, pulling myself up. I timed it just right. I waddled to the door. At the ten-second count, I launched.

"What was that?" a voice asked.

"A girl."

"You're kidding."

"Go, go, go, go."

Then there were several seconds of deep breaths, grunts, and quick prayers. The Marines were behind me. Or I should say, above me.

"Was she wearing a parachute?" the first voice asked with some unease.

Better than a parachute, I thought. A Flying Squirrel brand wingsuit.

Once I had cleared the aircraft, it took a few seconds of tumbling to figure out how to glide. The bike pack made it hard. At least the ocean gave me an orientation. The view was spectacular. Bright stars in the heavens and muted stars below. I had studied nighttime satellite images and thought I would see my target, but I was lost. I had no idea where I was. I was feeling panic. I switched radio channels and heard Duncan say, "Did you wear a parachute, stupid?"

"Listen, I've got more important things to think about."

"An altimeter?"

"No altimeter."

"Alright. I'm with Beta Team at our mobile base. We are poised to enter the Governor's compound. I've got you on sonar and infrared. Bear north until I say when, and begin spiraling. That will bring you closer to the house. I'll provide you a running altitude."

Duncan gave me readouts until he said, "You have 35 seconds for chute deployment. I pray you're wearing one."

At least I had practiced unfolding the bike, which took 12 seconds in my room. But falling through the air, it took more strength and focus than I knew I had, to get that bike into a rideable configuration.

Worse, I couldn't see a thing below, and the Governor's house and his grassy slope were too far away.

Duncan at this point was screaming, "Deploy your chute! Deploy your chute! You can't land the bike!"

Duncan was right. A patch of trees was in front of me now. Even with a chute, my landing would be a challenge. Reluctantly, I pulled the cord, jerked back, lifted over the

trees, and mercifully saw the pale grey of a field. My tires were about 10 feet from the ground when the chute caught a tree. I cut it loose and slammed into the ground. The bike squirreled, but I stayed up until a wheelbarrow-sized rock loomed ahead. I swerved and toppled sideways and then the world was a rolling, skidding chaos. When at last I came to a halt, I lay still for a minute. Miraculously everything checked out. My radio was quiet, though. Not broken, but out of range, I guess. I wobbled up to my feet and looked at the bike with my headlamp. It was intact, but there was something I had never seen before. Made me proud.

A hound dog was sitting nearby, watching me with curiosity.

I had to tell somebody. "Hey fella," I said, showing him the bike, "my very first scratch." Was he impressed? He whimpered, shook his ears, and trotted away.

Best of all, of course, was that I had the whole jump on my infra-red MoJoe.

I stripped the wingsuit and stuffed it into the bike bag, then wheeled up an incline until I could see the Governor's house on a rise a mile north.

I was way off target. I sighed.

Why did I come anyway? Was it just for the jump? Even if I had landed on the grassy slope, I really had had no plan. Was I going to show off and dodge bullets again like last time? What good had that done? Duncan had used his brain and figured out a way to rescue Irina, while I had been only a side show.

I noticed a lighter band to my left and found it was a gravel road. Too depressed to ride, I walked along, the hound dog with me once more.

Eventually, I came to the iron perimeter fence and could see the house again, popping and flickering like someone was shooting off firecrackers, but no doubt it was firearms and flash-bangs. Marine Special Forces giving them Hell. Literally. A blaze burned near the water—the Governor's yacht.

The road continued along the fence and ended at a stumpy brick building, the brick similar to that of the Governor's house and with a wide garage door. I couldn't see a way to cross the fence, bike or no bike—the jump between roof and fence too far.

Just then my phone rang. Duncan's voice. "Carlson?"

"Yep. Useless, but here."

"Thank God. Somewhere on Earth, I assume."

"Yep. I'm not dead. Due south of the house. Missed the landing zone."

"Obvious. We're done here. The sex traffickers are dead or captured. Mostly dead, I'm afraid. We can't find the Governor, however. Can you ride? You want someone to pick you up?"

"That'd be nice. I've got more bruises than I thought."

"We've got you located. It will be awhile, 'cause that gravel road… Someone's checking a map for me. It doesn't go anywhere. But we'll find you."

"Should I ride out the road and meet you?"

"If you want. I have to go."

I climbed onto the bike and rode a few yards, but I was pretty stiff, so I got off and walked.

My doggy friend stayed behind at the brick building. He whined and scratched at the door. Lights flashed on. A motion detector. The garage door creaked and rattled open. Headlights streamed out and lit the trees ahead, and from the door crept a black SUV. And yes, it still had a large dent in the roof.

There must be a tunnel from the house to the garage.

The SUV's tires spun in the gravel as the vehicle gained speed, and I realized there might be one final, impossible, daring bike trick left for me to perform. One I had never thought of before. One harder than jumping from an airplane. And it was the purpose for me missing the target so badly. Maybe it was why I was born and brought into my family.

The Governor's presidential campaign was over. Good. His sex trafficking career was over. Good. But he would find a way to stay free. He was still in office. He would avoid

punishment and cook up some new corruption. Or maybe he was fleeing the country to escape justice. But I could prevent him. This all happened so fast.

The car approached, accelerating. The driver was leaning forward, his nose almost touching the steering wheel. I had never laid eyes on him before, but I recognized his face from the many posters I'd seen. It *was* the Governor, pale and grim, illuminated by the light of his console. I timed it perfectly. My MoJoe was rolling in high definition. I felt weak and dizzy, but as with all my stunts, I smothered my fear and rode on, right into his path and held up my hand. The pup trotted near and began barking a frantic warning.

The Governor could have stopped in time. I hoped he would, but if we judged his character correctly… he sped up. He was right there, looming before me. The metal grill of the vehicle.

You asked for it, buddy, was my last thought…

➳

My memory of being run over and what the Governor shouted near the wreck of my body is fuzzy. As is the transport to the hospital. I heard a barking dog… When I came into full consciousness, Duncan and Irina were beside me. Duncan grinning, and Irina teary.

JTB came in and asked if I wanted to do his radio program from my hospital bed.

"The Governor?" I whispered.

"In jail. Hit and run. Attempted murder. Assault with a deadly weapon. They won't let him bond out. He's a flight risk. It's big news."

"Then, where's my microphone?"

➳

I really wasn't up to it so soon. Doctors said I was lucky to be alive, and with my damaged spine, it was unlikely I would walk again, let alone ride a bike. Little did they know riding was easier for me than walking. But it took a whole week for me to stabilize. At least one member of our gang sat with me around the clock.

Grandma came every day. I lamented to her that my *supernatural* ability on the bicycle had not covered deliberately peddling in front of a speeding SUV.

"You're wrong, dear," she said. "Anyone else would be plain dead. He ran you right over. Thumpity, thump, thump. Instinctively, you placed yourself so that the SUV missed your head and vital organs. Your bike punctured the Governor's oil pan and he ruined his engine. That's how we caught him."

"How about the pup? What happened to him?"

"He stayed by you the whole time, keeping guard. He was a stray, I guess, and we brought him home."

"Can we keep him, Grandma?"

"I don't see why not."

JTB was patient. As soon as I was able, and sooner than expected, they moved me to Grandma's house, where she had kitted out my room with hospital gear, and she hired nurses. I have a big room, so it was easy to bring in chairs, tables, and the audio equipment. Irina helped me dress and put on a little eyeliner. JTB's program goes live every Saturday night, barring national and regional emergencies, so it was pretty exciting. The lights were turned down low, and we had spectators in chairs shoved along one wall. Only family and Ergo. That's what I named the pup. I wanted to invite a couple intelligent, non-arrogant guys from school, but JTB nixed that. "Save your family secret for Mr. Right," he said.

JTB produced a transcript of the program, so it's easier just to quote from it and then add commentary, if I think it's important.

> **JTB**: Welcome to Strange Days Radio. I'm Jonathan T. Barron, and we are broadcasting from a secret location near Beaufort, South Carolina, from where no doubt you've heard the news. Governor Andrew Cobb has been arrested and is now in jail for allegedly running over a teenage girl in his SUV and then fleeing the scene. As you likely know, Governor Cobb recently dropped his candidacy for President of

the United States. There's been a lot of speculation from both the left and the right of the political spectrum about what's happening behind the scenes.

Well, we will add fuel to the fires. Because tonight, from her hospital bed, we have the girl who was run over. What was she doing riding a bicycle on that isolated gravel road near the Governor's summer home? She will tell you herself, after these messages from our sponsors.

The introduction was awkward, true. I mean, how could I explain myself being there in the middle of the night? But JTB had told us we should attack the issue head-on and tell as much truth as could be believed.

When JTB came back, he said, "Okay. I begin with a disclaimer. If Governor Cobb is convicted of hit and run, attempted murder. and so on, he'll be spending a lot of time in jail. Likely his political career is over. His lawyers may think that what we are about to tell you gives them a case for impeaching my guests' characters. They may think they have a case for slander against me and my guests. I dare them. Try it. Just try it. We have the evidence on video. Our story is real. At their request, and to protect their privacy, we're not using our guests' actual names. They are not publicity hounds. All they want is for right to be done. As for our listeners, all I can say is, believe it or not.

"We will call our first guest, 'Marie.'"

So, I explained that I had jumped from a plane with some military guys whose mission was to shut down the Governor's sex trafficking. I didn't say they were Marines. I didn't say anything about my bike riding stunts. JTB guided me with questions. I told everything I saw and heard. Then JTB asked me the dreaded question.

"I know this is personal, Marie, and it's an uncomfortable issue. But why did you join this mission? Why did you make the jump?"

I paused a long time, a couple seconds of dead air being a

long time on radio. I finally said, "What really matters is the girls who were enslaved and this evil man that so many people trusted. I wanted to help. I'm lucky that I have people who care for me. Friends and relatives who protect me. Not everyone has this. I had to do something."

"You did help, didn't you?"

I nodded.

JTB affirmed as much to the radio audience. "And it cost her. She's lost the use of her legs. You can't see her, but Marie has tears in her eyes. She lost a lot already. I think it's okay to tell you her parents both died less than a year ago. When we come back, we'll talk with another girl who was abducted by the Governor's sex trafficking thugs, and who was rescued by none other than Marie's cousin, a young man who is a human bloodhound."

We broke for another round of commercials, then Irina, as "Iris," told her whole story again, including the scene with Whitmire, then Uncle Al as "Abel" succinctly filled in the details of the lottery scandal.

Last was Duncan. He was going by the name "Dennis." He touched on his role in tracking Irina when she was first kidnapped and how he called a taxi to rescue her.

Here's more transcript:

JTB: You have an extraordinary sense of smell.

DENNIS: Yes, sir.

JTB: How extraordinary?

DENNIS: I've been tested. The creature with the best sense of smell is probably a male moth, but it can best detect only a female moth's pheromone. Next would be a bear, probably the grizzly, which can smell better than a bloodhound. My ability to identify scent is probably 100 times greater than a grizzly bear. For example, I can tell what brand of cigar you smoked. I can smell the proximity of a wall by the gassing of its paint. I know how long ago the wall was painted. You see, I can also smell across time. For example, this microphone was used by a… a conifer tree? I know that in

this room… [Pause. Takes a deep breath through his nose.] There's a woman three weeks pregnant.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: <Squeal> I didn't know! It must be me! We've been trying for a year!

DENNIS: She tried only an hour ago.

MARIE: Duncan!

JTB: Umm. Okay. I must remind my guests this is a family program. So, Dennis, tell the scene in the Governor's house, of how you used your powers of smell.

DENNIS: Yes, sir. I didn't parachute in with Marie and Team Alpha, but I entered with the second team on the downwind side of the estate. Five men, and me. We climbed over the fence with a titanium ladder. I helped locate any hostiles who were outside. When we were sure the grounds were secure, Team Alpha cleared the known rooms. My job then was to find the hidden rooms. This took time, but not as long as you'd expect. I jogged through the mansion and located the secret doors and tunnels. Once these had been breached, team members stepped back and let me check the air. In most cases, no one fired on us. I could tell how big a room was and who was in it, if anyone. And what their intentions were, even in dark. So, we found a dormitory full of girls, 30 of them chained to their beds. Two guys with guns were guarding them. One of them dropped his gun. The other didn't, and we shot him dead.

JTB: Was that hard?

DENNIS: I was armed, too, you know. I can shoot.

JTB: Really?

DENNIS: Yes, sir.

JTB: There's something else special about you, isn't there? Something besides your superhero powers of smell. Would you tell us about it?

DENNIS: It's not a big deal.

JTB: Do you mind if I tell?

DENNIS: No, sir. My friends and relatives all know.

JTB: This young man is blind. Totally blind. He wears thick glasses to conceal the fact. How do you get around? I

mean, you seem in all respects to be a sighted person.

DENNIS: Doctors believe that as I was developing inside my mother, somehow a wire—a nerve connection—split in my brain. The part of my brain that processes sophisticated visuals connected to my olfactory system. So my eyes are normal; it's just they never were hooked up. Then, my olfactory epithelium is also considerably more densely innervated than the average person. So, that sort of explains it.

JTB: Sort of?

DENNIS: Some of it isn't explainable. I should have a really long snout.

JTB: You do have a big nose, if I may say.

DENNIS: <Laughs.> I can't see it. And I can't smell it either.

AUDIENCE: <Laughter.>

DENNIS: I usually get around okay by smell, and I also have sonar implants, but even those aren't perfect. I bump into things.

JTB: What does the future hold for you?

DENNIS: I want to go to medical school so I can learn to diagnose diseases by scent. My father wants me to join Special Forces so I can help on ops like this more often. He's pretty happy with how things turned out, and it was fun. We'll see. Maybe I'll do both.

JTB: Amazing. That wraps up our program. Strange Days Radio. Tune in next week when we interview some of the girls rescued during this daring raid on the summer home of Governor Cobb, former Governor Cobb, of South Carolina.

DENNIS: You have a thyroid condition.

JTB: What?

DENNIS: Your thyroid isn't producing enough T4, and your TSH levels aren't keeping up. Do you feel tired all the time?

Though it wasn't planned, the engineer let that last spontaneous banter go over the air and conclude the program. JTB thought it brilliant.

I was tired, so people left the room quickly. They dismantled and removed all the equipment the next day. By afternoon, when my room was back to normal, Grandma came in and sat by my bed.

"I'm proud of you, Carlson, dear."

"Grandma?"

"What is it, sweetie?"

"I don't want to be Carlson anymore. I want to wear lovely dresses once in awhile. I'm ready for a new life. I want to go by my middle name."

"Marie?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I thought it was funny you picked it for the radio. I went through a transition like you did when I was your age. Or a little older."

"How?"

"I was a smart-ass know-it-all, until I met your grandfather."

I gave her a funny look.

"Our family is odd, isn't it?"

"No, ma'am. Not really."

"But we do have secrets."

"Doesn't everyone?" My secret wasn't spectacular or anything. Grandma looked at me like she expected me to tell her, and I didn't want to disappoint, so I said, "I've always known I was adopted. I'm not really a member of the family."

"Oh, yes, you are."

"I know what you mean, but because I'm adopted, my bike riding isn't supernatural, like you guys are. Like Duncan. It's just me. I'm the best mountain biker in the world. Was, I mean." I took a deep breath and let loose a huge sigh.

"I have a secret to share with you, dear."

I didn't say anything.

"I don't guess at things. I really know them. I don't want people to know I know, so I pretend. I can't explain why, or how, but it just is. I don't try to understand, but I try to be wise with this knowledge, and humble. Your Grandpa Middleton

and I were poor, but we were happy. Grandpa needed to be the head of the house—to have the final say on our decisions. I loved him and let him be who he was. And I also knew he wouldn't be with us forever. Those years with our children, your father a baby growing into a boy growing into a man, were filled with fun. It was hard, but oh, so worthwhile. And when Grandpa died, I knew I needed to use my gift for our family, and that's when I bought a lottery ticket.

"And I knew, Marie, the date your parents would die. I always cautioned them about riding motorcycles, but I couldn't say more. I don't caution you. Maybe you've noticed. There's a reason. We didn't tell you about being adopted because we wanted you to be confident. You always took smart, calculated risks and challenged your abilities. You needed to jump from the airplane and ride into the path of that SUV. You needed to risk losing your life."

"I suppose."

"It's not over, dear. I haven't told you yet, but I've opened the house as a safe haven for the girls you all rescued. They'll stay until they're ready to resume their lives or begin new ones. A transition home. Several returned to their families already. But this crime is worldwide, and we'll be hosting girls from everywhere, Asia, Europe, Africa, South America. All over. I've hired Irina to direct the program."

"She'll do great. Duncan will love having her around. And maybe it's something I can get involved in, too."

Grandma only smiled, and I knew why she did. All of those vague smiles through the years. She couldn't say what she knew.

But I was mistaken about her smile today. My door opened, and in came Duncan, Irina, and JTB. As they stood back, Irina put her arm around Duncan's shoulders like a big sister, and girls entered the room one or two at a time. Some even my age. They were happy, sad, and each one beautiful in her own way. They thanked me simply and left.

Then Duncan's father entered, wearing his steam-pressed uniform. He and Irina traded friendly glances. It's a start. Then

some of the Special Forces entered wearing casual clothes. Normal, manly guys made of steel, not only physically, but in their core. They really cared.

One of them said, "When you're old enough, Marie, please sign up for Marine Corps Special Forces. You'll be the first girl. I'd love you on our team." He took my hand.

I told him to be careful what he asked for.

At the end of the line of Marines was my cousin Duncan. He said he'd ride on my handlebars again any day. I'll not reveal if I cried.

To wrap this story up, I'll say that Duncan began checking on my condition and gave the doctors valuable information so that I could heal quicker. It didn't hurt that he kicked butt to keep them thinking about my case. The blind boy who could sniff out all their skeletons and who had gone into combat was more than intimidating.

And I actually began to feel my legs.

Who knows if I will ever ride again? Well, Grandma knows, but she'll never tell. I have the videos of my incredible flying squirrel suit/mountain bike landing and the awesome getting-run-over-by-an-SUV trick, and they're up at YouTube and other places, and still garnering millions of views, but that's past. I have to live in the present and meet its challenges, whatever they are.

Hey, but picture me doing amazing, impossible stunts in a wheelchair. Even better, racing down waterfalls on one of those arm-powered bicycles. I'm sure Grandma Middleton will get me one someday.

END

“Catfish Possum”

“Crisper Rat”

When Earth Whispers

During the first seconds of last spring's devastating earthquake in Lynchville, California, some people believed they had fallen ill, some assumed they had been struck by lightning, some thought trucks had rammed their houses. Those living adjacent to railroad tracks wondered if a train had derailed nearby.

I was praying in my study at the church early Sunday morning. As the furniture jerked back and forth and books tumbled through the air, it occurred to me that the world might be ending and I would die. When the shaking stopped, I picked myself up and limped through the wreckage.

Outdoors, nothing seemed different until I noticed an asphalt-topped plane of our new parking lot like a frozen wave, jutting twenty feet high and sloping sharply below ground level. As I walked closer, I could see deep into the crack. I looked around at the sky. Birds had begun singing again, and the sunlight streaming below a cloudbank threw everything into high contrast, shadow and light.

As violent as the earthquake had been, injuries were few and damage isolated. The following day the sky cleared, leaving nothing between us and the brilliant sun but a crystalline-pure atmosphere. Each morning, the green eastern hills radiated with an aura of excruciating intensity. I thought my vision was impaired, like when the optometrist dilates your pupils for an exam, only this felt permanent.

Within a week, the trembler had become an inconsequential curiosity for our church members, excepting the anticipated cost of parking lot repair. Life for me returned to normal: that is, until a Mr. Barron made a blind appointment to meet me at my restored study. He was tall, beardless, in his mid-thirties, and a trifle overweight.

"Pastor Taylor, you may have heard of me, Jonathan T.

Barron."

"I don't guess I have."

"I'm a paranormal researcher. I investigate the strange. Haunted houses, demonic possession, body snatching, premature burials, cannibalism and vampires, apparitions, ritual sacrifices, floating lights, UFOs. All that."

"Okay."

"I produce a weekly nationally syndicated show called Strange Days Radio. I have a large following and I've been on television and I wrote several books. I live in Lynchville."

"Interesting."

Jonathan T. Barron looked at me with skepticism. "Pastor Taylor, people take this stuff seriously. I usually talk about ordinary legend or folklore, and I'm the first to expose frauds, hoaxes, and plain lies. Much of what I find has natural causes. I'm a debunker more than a believer. But things happen—documented, measured events, macabre and weird incidents defying explanation, that contradict everything we know."

"Miracles."

Barron shook his head. "Most contradictions I see are bad."

"What do you need from me, Mr. Barron?"

"The earthquake was specific, Pastor Taylor. Seismologists and engineers can't explain how quake-resistant buildings were leveled and old buildings next door were left untouched. I need the history of your parking lot."

"A house once stood there," I said. "We used it for missionaries on furlough. Our church grew, and we needed parking, so we tore it down last year. The house was built early in the last century."

"Any strange reports?"

"Not that I know of. But I've been at this church only for— We took the position when our daughter started college. What are you looking for, exactly?"

Barron sighed and massaged his temples. "I've had calls and letters from all around Lynchville, but also from people in your church."

"Our church? And the nature of the contacts?"

"Narratives of nightmares, squeaking sounds in the dark, cats throwing up, smears of blood left on lawn furniture and window sills. Police are DNA testing the blood."

"Oh Lord, you're a sensationalist."

"You know that I'm not. I want you to help me, Pastor Taylor. May I photograph your parking lot?"

"Take your pictures," I said. "But that's all."

Pastors are often last to learn about problems in their congregations, and so I wouldn't have been surprised if no one had told me about any freaky occurrences. I put a vague notice in the church bulletin. Of our 700 members, a dozen contacted me. I must say, people weren't candid; they only wanted the uncanny events to stop. Just one person confessed anything, and it was an abortion she regretted from when she was a college student.

"Tell me if your nightmares don't stop," I said.

"There's more than nightmares. I hear screaming in my dreams and I wake up. I think it's me screaming, but then I hear a tiny baby crying outside."

Local television news reported that neighbors in one community began to worry about a particular family—the mother was neglecting her children. When Child Protective Services arrived, they found the three young children malnourished and filthy, the house a pigsty, the woman lying on her bed, numb to the world. One isolated incident like this wouldn't have been so unusual, but new ghastly discoveries of child neglect emerged every day.

Jonathan Barron stopped by my house one evening, nervous and pale. "All this is connected. People are feeling a curse has descended on Lynchville. I'm totally inundated."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm not sleeping well."

I told him what little I learned from our church members. "Do you still want me involved? My hands are full with my own work."

"I'm, I'm not a religious person, and I'm out of my depth here."

"What's the cause of these breakdowns?"

"Official rumors say military-grade psychotropic drugs leaked into the Lynchville water supply. More likely it's someone out there tormenting vulnerable people. Maybe he's trying to extort them."

"A psychopath?" I asked.

"Perhaps. And if so, I can deal with him. I need you to help with the victims, if we meet any."

"We'll see," I said, trying to put him off. The truth was I didn't want to become involved.

But the horrible events escalated, with new tragedies every day. A grey-headed professor stripped off her clothing and cavorted across her campus until university police tackled her. A homeless man discovered a dead newborn baby in a Wal-Mart dumpster. A retired fireman shot his prize show dogs. Then a Lynchville woman axed her children while they were sleeping and bashed herself in the head.

Jonathan called me late one night, agitated, and said he needed to show me some things. "I'll pick you up at your house," he said. "Early morning."

"Jonathan, I can not get away. I have meetings, hospital visits, and—"

"Put them off."

"I can't."

"Damn it, yes you can!" he said with passion. "Our city is sliding into hell and you and I are the only ones who can figure out why. And then maybe we can do something."

"Okay. Okay. But make it after lunchtime."

Our first stop was the main branch of the public library. Jonathan led me to the reference section and a single metal cabinet next to a desk and an odd contraption.

He pulled an overstuffed file from his briefcase.

"On a morning of October 1945," he whispered, "a woman entered a private residence in Lynchville. Four hours later, the

woman was found dead in the front yard. She died from massive bleeding after a botched illegal abortion."

"Tragic."

"Yeah. It is. And gruesome. The Lynchburg *Citizen* said her uterus had been ripped from top to bottom. The coroner reported, 'portions of the fetus partially extruded from the tear.'"

"Ugh," I grunted.

Jonathan opened a drawer in the cabinet and withdrew a canister. He removed a roll of wide film and loaded it into the contraption. "This microfiche reader whines like a banshee," he said.

Nearby library patrons glared as he noisily scrolled down endless newspaper pages, then he said, "This is it. One of the final articles in the series."

The banner headline said, "RESPECTED PHYSICIAN GUILTY."

Jonathan continued in a low voice. "The victim was a 23-year-old woman whose husband was a soldier in the Pacific. He hadn't come home yet after the war. It's not hard to guess that the father of the baby was not her husband, and she sought relief from a Dr. G.D. Gardner, whose license had been revoked after narcotics convictions. Dr. Gardner was subsequently arrested, and convicted of manslaughter. He spent the rest of his life in prison."

"The back alley abortionist, a doctor?"

"A good one gone bad."

"Imagine what the girl's husband felt when he learned his wife died this way," I said. "It's terrible."

"Gardner's residence, where the girl's body was found, was on Haywood Road in west Lynchville."

"Our church is on Haywood."

Jonathan scrolled down half a page. "Look."

I leaned forward. "Two stories, brick. That, that's the house we tore down." I was stunned. "We should put up a memorial for the poor woman and her baby. Oh my. We paved over where she died."

"You'd be shocked with how much holy ground is paved over." Jonathan tapped his file folder. "But we don't understand all this yet."

Our next stop was along Henson Road in the Ponderosa Village, the site of a destroyed office building. We parked at the adjacent motel. Nearly the entire block was heaped with rubble. Heavy equipment was loading and hauling away the rock, brick, and mangled lumber. Clattering of bulldozer tracks, engine roar, smoke, and dust filled the air.

"It's amazing no one was hurt," I said.

"Here, in the shrubbery."

A landscaped corner of the lot had not been affected by the quake, nor yet by the cleanup work. Stuck in the ground was a small wooden cross draped with a purple, hand-knotted rosary.

"The abortion center, WomanCare, was on this lot once," Jonathan said. "It moved when the state tore down the building to widen the road."

"How did you find this out?"

"One idea leads to another. I allow myself to think what most people unconsciously block from their minds. The present WomanCare was shaken down also."

"Oh, my dear God." I was rattled. "These things don't happen."

"Yeah, they do. Walls of Jericho?"

"What else? Any other destruction linked to abortion?"

"I have one more lead."

"You should have told me these things on the phone."

"It wouldn't have been compelling," Jonathan said. "I don't like being accused of faking evidence. The lady we're meeting is the former director of WomanCare. Her name is Linnea. She's willing to talk with you. We're expected."

"Then, let's go. I need to sit down."

We drove away from the city into a middle-class suburban neighborhood. As we pulled up to a ranch-style house, an obese man with no shirt, wearing his long blonde curling hair loose down his back, was mowing the yard.

"Come on in," he said.

As obese as her husband, Linnea had pretty facial features. We introduced ourselves and she frowned at Jonathan, but when she looked at me, she seemed reassured.

"I quit WomanCare in 2008 when it moved across town," she said. "I'd been thinking about quitting for a long time. When my own daughter was born, it hit me how we were aborting children who were only younger than she was. So, I took a nursing job at a regular medical clinic."

"Tell me about the abortion business," Jonathan said.

"What we did was legal. It was wrong, but it was legal." She hesitated for a moment. "We did abortions almost up to birth."

I couldn't hide my horror.

"I know," she said. "You're right. I didn't actually kill them, the babies, but I was an accomplice." Her voice failed and she cried into a handkerchief for a while. Then she held out her arms and said, "Look at me. I wear my sins in fat. My husband, too. He was the security guard."

The husband silently nodded.

"Does WomanCare still do late-term abortions?" Jonathan asked.

"God, no. Not now. They quit when they moved. Only up to 20 weeks."

"Only?" Jonathan asked.

"Yeah, that's bad, too, isn't it?"

"If I may ask," I said, "what did you do with the bodies, the corpses?"

"We sold what we didn't send to pathology. They're used… for different purposes, research and education."

Jonathan was thinking, his face in concentrated disarray. "You sold them?"

"We shipped some fresh, refrigerated. Individually or in bulk. We kept the others in storage. Someone else handled that part."

"Oh… What storage?"

"The Xtra Space facility on San Ramon Road. We rented a couple units."

"That's it!" Jonathan exclaimed. "Another property wrecked by the earthquake. I looked at it, but it's locked up tight."

"I think it went bankrupt," she said. "I shudder every time I drive by."

Jonathan seemed to be done, so I said, "May I ask before we leave, have you had any nightmares or unusual experiences lately? Anything odd or creepy?"

"I've heard that others have had them. But not me. I used to be severely depressed and went into therapy, but it's been a few years. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"I like my own church." She looked at Jonathan and asked, "Will you talk about us on your radio show? You promised you wouldn't."

Jonathan squirmed. Before he could answer, I said, "He won't unless you give permission."

"I don't. You know, my husband and I recently lost 114 pounds between us," she said and smiled.

Back in the car, Jonathan's phone rang. He had been ignoring incoming calls throughout the day, but he took this one. Jonathan put the speaker on.

"This is Sergeant Hernandez of the LPD," the girlish female voice said. "We've got DNA results, from the blood samples. You asked me to call you."

"Sergeant Hernandez," Jonathan said. "How are you? What did you find?"

The signal seemed to have cut off.

"Are you there? Sergeant Hernandez? Isabel?"

"I'm here." She cleared her throat. "The state is investigating the lab. We think the samples, or the results, have been tampered with."

"Why? Was it human blood?"

"The questionable results are, that in many cases, the blood is from an offspring of the homeowners—the complainants."

"Child abuse."

"We've gone to another lab to follow up, but, Mr. Barron, some of these people don't have children. They never did."

"Are they lying, Sergeant?"

"They're scared out of their minds."

"Have they received demands for money?"

"Hmm, we'll look into that," she said in a softer, almost cheerful tone. "Thanks for the idea."

After Jonathan disconnected, I said, "She sounds young."

"Smart and cute, too," he said and grinned. "I'm trying to talk her into going on a date with me."

We drove down San Ramon Road. Clouds had rolled in from the west, from the not-too-distant ocean, and daylight already was receding. Vehicles turned on their headlights.

Weeds and weed trees grew rampant on the Xtra Space property wherever they found foothold. The buildings had been jumbled up, but the wire mesh fence on the perimeter stood intact. Someone had posted shiny red No Trespassing signs, and the security cameras looked potentially operational. We walked around the site, and downwind we smelled a rank foulness.

"I'm going in for a look," Jonathan said and began climbing the fence.

"The concertina wire looks mean."

"It's loose here. Find something to push this lower strand up."

I glanced around for a wooden pole or broken tree branch, but there wasn't anything. Jonathan had by now pulled himself horizontal to the ground and was trying to roll himself over the top, under the razor wire, but the wire caught him in the back. He froze there, grunting in pain. "You got something yet? A pole?"

"Should I go to a hardware store?"

"Yeah, and buy some wire cutters while I wait, stuck up here." With resignation he said, "Okay. Failed," and eased off the razor wire. He began to work his legs downward so he

could drop, but let loose prematurely and slammed the ground body-first.

"Ummph," he said and started laughing. "Ohh… My arms just quit."

"You all right?"

"Let's see. Nothing hurt but ego." He struggled to his feet. "Belly abrasions. My back is dripping. Blood, isn't it?"

He held still while I inspected the wound through the slice in his shirt. "Does it hurt?"

"Not at all. Not now."

"Hard to see, but your cut is probably half an inch long. Shouldn't we go to the emergency room?"

"No, no. It's just a puncture. I've got good seat covers. Let's find out who owns this place."

As we walked to the car, Jonathan studied his phone. In a minute he said, "Got you, Lanny Gillman," and entered the address into his GPS.

At Gillman's wood frame house, a thick tree had uprooted and was lying across the yard, branches blocking the main sidewalk. A decrepit blue van was parked in the gravel driveway that ended at a free-standing garage. When I knocked at the house's front door, a monstrous beast on the inside barked and tore at the wood with its claws. The door vibrated with his bass voice.

"He'd kill us, if he could," Jon said.

He rapped several times and the dog's roar grew more frantic. A cold chill gripped me and I shivered. As we walked down the steps, the monster dog, black and white, gaunt and muscular, appeared in an open upstairs window and watched us. Not barking, but sniffing the air. Saliva dripped from his mouth.

"I hope he doesn't jump," I said.

We approached the garage. The dog now watched from an upstairs window at the side of the house. The garage windows were papered over, but the door at the back was ajar. Jon paused and pulled up an audio recorder that had been hanging around his neck on a lanyard.

"For my show," he said.

He pushed the door open, and I stepped in behind him. Symphonic music played on a radio (Elgar, I believe), and a man in his sixties wearing a baseball cap was stretching packing tape onto a cardboard tube, the tape making a ratcheting sound as it pulled off the dispenser. His back to us, he was sitting at a work table. I cleared my throat like in the movies. (What a stupid idea.)

He jerked around, screamed like a maniac, and fell off his stool.

"Shit," he said as he labored, panting, to his feet. "You scared me. Didn't you see the No Trespassing signs?"

He proceeded to cover and flip sheets of what looked like plastic poster board.

"Mr. Gillman, I'm Jonathan T. Barron of the syndicated show, Strange Days Radio, and this is my investigative partner, Pastor Paul Taylor of Second Presbyterian Church." He handed Gillman a business card.

"Yeah? I know your show. Nice to meet you, pastor." His glance shifted around the garage as if checking for anything else to conceal.

"We're investigating the earthquake," Jon said.

As Jon told him of our findings, Gillman grew pale. I then noticed the large cardboard box of shipping tubes. There were lots of boxes.

"According to a former director of WomanCare," Jon said, "units of your self-storage building once housed the bodies of aborted fetuses. Late term babies."

"Before I bought the place. I don't know anything."

"Is that so?" Jon said and flipped over one of the upside-down posters.

"Hands off!" Gillman lunged forward and crushed the poster into a ball. "You guys leave, or I'll put Panda on you. My dog. You don't want that. He's hungry, and expensive to feed."

I started away and Jon took my arm. Neither of us spoke or moved. Jon was calling his bluff.

"What's around your neck?" Gilman said. "Are you recording me?"

"No."

Gillman strode around to Jon and jerked the recorder hard, breaking the spring clip of the lanyard. He smashed the device onto the floor. It bounced, broke into pieces, and he crushed the largest piece with his heel.

"You destroyed my property."

"You're trespassing. I'm going for Panda."

"I'm calling the police."

"Oh, that's better. Saves me a mess."

Jon called 911, reported an assault and gave the address. Then he looked at Gilman and said, "We'll wait."

Gillman waited a few seconds and then began picking up and straightening his garage. I stepped outside, ready to wait a tedious half-hour, or more. Above me, patches of brilliant stars seemed to race through contorted clouds. I didn't remember the stars ever being so painfully bright.

Headlights in my face stole away my vision. The police, and so soon. A female officer climbed from the black Dodge Charger.

"Over here," I called and went in to tell Jon.

Through the open door, we heard the dog roaring. The officer tapped the door with a knuckle and entered. "What's the problem?"

Strangely, Jon was smiling.

Both talking at once, Gillman explained how we were trespassing, and Jon explained how Gillman broke his recorder.

The officer, capturing the gist, interrupted. "Okay, gentlemen, here's the deal. You can go down to the magistrate's office tomorrow morning and fill out warrants for each other's arrest, or you can—"

"Work it out," I said.

"Yeah."

"He's trespassing and was recording me illegally," Gillman said.

"Doesn't matter," the officer said. "It's a criminal offense to break someone's property."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yep, yep." Gillman sighed. "Jonathan T. Barron?"

"That's me."

"Okay. We'll work it out."

"All right," the officer said. "Sir, do you mind if I talk with these two visitors privately for a moment?"

"Suit yourself."

We walked outside, away from the garage. "What's going on, Jonathan?" she whispered. "I'm just off my shift. Look, anyone else would haul your butts in for trespassing. What happened to your back?"

Of course, I thought. Sergeant Hernandez.

"This guy's up to his neck in the earthquake deal," Jon said. "No time to tell you more."

She shook her head. "It's crazy. You need to involve the police."

"Soon. I promise."

"You're in my debt."

"I am," Jon said with exaggerated sincerity. "Let me buy you a steak dinner, Isabel. This weekend. After my show."

She smiled, and Jonathan was right. She *was* cute.

"You're a sneaky devil," she said. "How did you get mixed up with this guy?" she said to me. She began walking back to her cruiser, or, I should say, personal car. "I'll answer you tomorrow, Jonathan, when I'm not tired." The beast Panda resumed roaring from the upstairs window and she glared at it coldly. "Someone should shoot that animal."

When we re-entered the garage, Gillman had his back turned again and jumped out of his skin, again.

"Oh, it's you," he said after he recovered. "Yep, yep. Work it out. The Xtra Space once kept late-term fetuses? Still does. Early ones, too. At least last time I checked before the earthquake. I'm afraid to go inside there now."

"All those bodies in a damaged building?" I said. "Do you

realize what a health hazard this is?"

"Yeah, with the electricity off and the freezers thawing. Containers all broken to hell. No insurance. Oh yeah. I couldn't face it. Couldn't face the attention."

"We need to call the Health Department," I said.

"Closed," Gillman said. "It's after hours."

"Then call 911, again."

Mr. Gillman scooted onto his stool, propped his elbows on the table, and rested his chin between his hands. "I'll probably be arrested," he said weakly. "Unless I can clean the mess up first."

"Wait," Jon said as I pulled out my phone. "Let's look before they seal the building. Before any clues are beyond our reach. Will you let us in? Now?"

"If Pastor Taylor prays first," he said mockingly.

"Good idea," Jon said. "By the way, what have you got going here?"

"You want to know? I suppose a picture isn't as bad as reality." He turned over a sheet of poster board.

I'd never seen anything so nasty before. It was a 2-foot-by-3 foot image of an aborted baby. I felt like throwing up.

"I sell them," he said. "I take photos and make posters. My pictures are famous."

"How perverse," Jon said.

"Me, perverse? Anti-abortion fanatics parade them in front of the clinics. Children see them. That's what's perverse."

"Aren't you anti-abortion?"

"Not particularly. I'm pro-choice. But you can't help feeling something."

"Do you make much money?"

"Not anymore. I tried selling bodies at first, after I bought the place cheap and found them inside."

"Disgusting," I said. "It's strange that law enforcement never investigated you."

"Let's all leave now, *please*." Jon said.

"How could a photograph of a legal procedure be illegal?" Gillman said. "This isn't pornography. People don't feel like

killing someone when they see a corpse… I never did. On the other hand…"

"Just, just shut up," Jon said.

"Yep, yep… Give me a second."

Gillman rummaged in a corner and lifted a heavy box. "Fresh back-up batteries for the security cams. The old ones are expired, I'm sure. It's late for changing them, isn't it? Hey, will I be on your radio program?"

"Maybe."

"I'll need to be paid."

Jon shrugged a shoulder. "How did I know it already? That's bizarre."

"Hey, don't disrespect me. I've got nice pictures, too. A whole photo album of babies saved because of my posters. Customers send them."

Gillman drove in his van by himself. When we arrived, he unlocked the gate and let us inside. Nearby streetlights painted the scene with an ominous orange-grey glow.

Knowing what we smelled made the stench worse.

Gillman unlocked the nearest unit, and as he pulled the door open, it scraped the concrete floor. We peered in without entering. Faint light eked in through the partly collapsed ceiling. The smell of formaldehyde nearly knocked me over. What Jonathan's flashlight revealed looked like the shower room floor of a Nazi death camp, except the naked dead people here were tiny, not fully formed, and mixed with shattered glass. I stepped backwards and retched. Jon was taking flash pictures. Gillman walked away saying he'd reactivate the security cameras.

Standing near the next unit, Jon suddenly bellowed, "Gillman, come here please! Gillman!"

"Give me a damn minute," he yelled from the door at the office end of the facility.

I went to see what had gotten Jon's attention. He was staring at smears of partly dried blood on the pavement near a tear in the wall. The smears formed trails going in different

directions.

"Crap," Gillman said when he ran up. "An animal's been in here. A raccoon or coyote. This is a reefer unit."

"No footprints," Jon said. "Open it up."

"Not without a gas mask."

"Give me the key," Jon said.

I made sure I was upwind. Jon inserted the key, but the lock was jammed. Gillman trotted toward the office and returned holding a tiny tube with a nozzle from which he squirted into the keyhole. "Graphite powder," he said, and backed up to where I was. The key turned and Jon opened the door. The odor of freezer burn and rotted flesh, even worse than before, seeped toward us. I covered my mouth and nose and backed away further. Jon said nothing as he disappeared inside, and when he walked over to us a minute later, his face looked pale and wet, like a clammy cadaver.

"I've been in battle in Afghanistan," he said, "and I've never seen what's in there. It's indescribable. There was a severed foot… I don't think an animal has been inside, not a hungry one. Nothing's been eaten. Okay, Gillman, should I call the police again, or will you?"

"I will," Gillman grumbled.

Jon took photographs of everything. When the police arrived, they sent us to the sidewalk, and what flew from their mouths when they looked inside cannot be repeated on radio, as Jon said. A Hazmat team arrived soon afterwards. I finally called my wife and told her what we'd been doing, and I apologized for not calling before.

Print and broadcast media showed up and Gillman edged into his van and slunk away. Police told the reporters nothing.

But Jonathan is a pro and gave a number of interviews, saying: "My weekly syndicated show, Strange Days Radio, is named after a song by the classic rock band, the Doors. The real story of these dead babies is suggested in its lyrics. 'Strange days have found us. Strange days have tracked us down.' You won't believe what I've uncovered, and I'll reveal it all on my show tomorrow evening."

Jon took me home. We didn't have a lot to say during the drive. As we neared my house, he accepted a phone call and it was Gillman who said, "What happened after I left?"

"Not much, I expect the police will see you again in the morning." Jon hung up and said to me, "I didn't mention this before, but when I was with the thawed-out bodies, I felt they were watching me with malice. I've felt this before on investigations, but never so intense, so bitter. I can handle blood and decay, but that? It got to me."

"We both need sleep, and food."

"You're probably right."

We pulled up to my house. Jon stared out the windshield and I opened the door.

"Wait a second!" he said. "Is it possible Gillman has been sneaking around Lynchville and tormenting the mothers? He knew who they were. The bodies were labeled, some of them. He might have another demented money-making enterprise in play."

I scoffed at my own cynicism. "That would explain the blood and the noises."

"It's a theory," Jon said. "Conscience-tortured people receiving letters from zombie babies demanding inheritance money or else the curse will never end. He doesn't look capable of that kind of depravity, but they never do. He could be an agent for someone else."

"His damned demon dog?"

Jon half laughed. "You astonish me, pastor."

"If Gillman's in any way responsible for this, we've stopped him. We've found our solution."

"Let's talk more tomorrow."

That night, my wife disconnected our phones so I wouldn't be disturbed. I sealed my clothes in a trash bag and showered. As I told my wife about the day, sparing her the worst, I managed to eat a little vegetable soup. She said our children invited us to a week with them in Hawaii in February for our anniversary. I sighed with pleasure, looking forward to

resurrecting my surfing skills and riding the surging blue waves again, as I had in my youth. I closed my eyes and imagined feeling the breeze on my skin. It felt good being home, warm and clean, with my wife giving me a shoulder massage. That and a glass of sherry put me down for the night. The next thing I knew, my wife was shaking me in bed, and someone was banging on the front door and shouting.

I threw on a jacket.

It was Jonathan.

"You've got to come now," he said hoarsely. "Gillman called, he left a message screaming, 'They're murdering me! They're murdering me!'"

"Did you call 911?"

"Busy signal."

My wife brought pants, shoes and socks, and a shirt in an armload. I ran out barefoot and jumped into Jon's car. A murky, reluctant day was breaking. A man crawled on hands and knees in the yard across the street. Jon jammed his car into gear and accelerated, the car issuing a guttural snarl.

"Shouldn't we help?" I said.

"I stopped for a guy just like him. It's like he was on LSD. We got to check on Gillman."

"What do you think happened?"

"His targets caught him. His victims. I don't know."

We didn't get far when my wife called me.

"Honey," she said, "I didn't sleep last night. I stayed in the guest bedroom and read. I kept hearing shrieking and banging around the neighborhood, and alarms. Ambulance and police sirens. The power flicked off and on, and dogs were barking nonstop. I wanted to wake you, but you needed your sleep."

"You should have woken me. Did anyone call?"

"I disconnected the phones, remember? Check your voicemail."

"Ah. Thanks, dear. When I get time."

As we drove through neighborhoods, onto a highway, and along commercial strips, we saw people lying beside the road. And people running crazily. Wrecked cars. Fires blazing like a

citywide riot was in progress. Broken windows everywhere. The lights at intersections weren't working. We drew near to Gillman's house. I called 911, again. Still busy.

Suddenly, Jon skidded to a stop. "This is like ancient Egypt, during the Passover."

"You said you weren't a believer."

"I believe in the existence of evil. It's ultimate good that I doubt."

Jon then made a U-turn and said, "I think Gillman called from his Xtra Space."

We parked half up the sidewalk at the self-storage facility. The gate was unlocked. Lanny Gillman was lying on the ground and gripping a bolt cutter in one hand. The door to every one of the storage units stood wide open.

Jon checked his vitals. "He's dead, poor wretch."

"Oh my. Why was he here?"

"Probably collecting food for Panda."

"Nooo," I groaned.

Jon took his camera and began filming. "You're viewing the remains of the owner of this facility," he narrated. "I don't see any lethal injuries, but his skin and clothing are dusty and scuffed, as if he thrashed in agony, and this… is one of the rooms where the bodies are kept. The earthquake— Oh my gosh. They're gone. They're all gone."

He paused, lowered and turned off the camera, and said," I can't do this. I'd be as bad as Gillman."

We looked everywhere, and nothing remained of all the dead babies we had seen, not even a smell. And possibly *all* the units had contained bodies, not only the two we saw earlier. The place was vacant and pristine clean. Blood smears no longer stained the pavement.

"The security camera," Jon said, and trotted to the office. The door wouldn't open, but he beat a window in with a chunk of concrete debris. He gingerly climbed inside and emerged from the door with a blanket under his arm. "I've got the video! Let's go."

"Where to?"

"My studio." He extended his hand, palm up. "Cool. It's starting to rain. What a relief."

"911 is ringing, finally," I said. "Police, please… We found a body… Xtra Space on Ramon… An adult… Okay." I looked at Jon. "They'll check it out when they can."

"Panda is dead in the office." He covered Gillman with the blanket.

"Shouldn't we stay until the police arrive?"

"No. It will be hours."

As Jon drove me home, the rain poured down hard. The fires we had seen earlier extinguished. By then no one was wandering witless in the streets anymore.

It turned into a marvelous day, considering the terror the city had endured during the night. A big storm had blown in from the Pacific, and rain descended all day, not so much as to cause landslides, but enough to calm everyone. The high contrast and brilliance of light I first noticed when the earthquake struck had been subdued by mist and clouds.

We activated our church networks and invited everyone to come talk and pray. We organized teams to check on neighbors. Despite the difficulty of travel, our building was packed by noon. People brought food and stayed all day, and the young people brought sleeping bags and pads so they could camp on the floor overnight.

Late that evening, Jonathan and I did his radio program, live.

Jonathan said as an introduction, "Believe me, of all the psychic, supernatural stories I've investigated in my career, this is the most incredible, the most horrifying, and the most personal for you, the listener. And I've got documentation, the evidence, here in my hands. I could post video on my website, though you'd say I faked it. I have pictures. But, I can't show you what I've seen. If you Lynchville listeners haven't been visited by horrible phenomena since our earthquake, then you're fine. You're more than fine.

"If you have been visited, then you know what I'm talking

about. Most of you out there are not in my town of Lynchville, but you've read or heard accounts or seen something on television. If you ever have trusted me, then don't trust the news people or the government. They ignore facts, explain everything else away, and mislead you—they can't help themselves, it's self-deception. Self-protection. We're going to take calls for the remainder of the show, but first, I want to introduce my co-host, Dr. Paul Taylor, senior pastor of Second Presbyterian Church of Lynchville. Dr. Taylor has been at my side during this whole ordeal."

"Thank you, Jonathan," I said. "I have only a few remarks, and then I'd be happy to take questions. You may expect me to emphasize sin, repentance, natural retribution (that is, you reap what you sow), and forgiveness, and I'm sorry if I disappoint you here. Those subjects are essential, but there are other times to hear the Gospel of Redemption. You can visit our church website to hear some of my past sermons.

"It's no secret that Jonathan and I discovered a storage facility containing the remains of aborted children. Thousands of them. Their parents came to Lynchville from around the U.S. It's also no secret that Jonathan and I are suspected of removing those remains and burying them in violation of state laws. In a few days, we'll be holding a memorial service at our church for those dead children. We'll also join in healing prayer for their parents, whoever they may be. We'll broadcast the service on streaming video. Everyone is welcome to attend or watch.

"Like many Christians, I believe that children who die before they're born, who die either naturally or unnaturally, and newborns and infants, those innocent children are in Heaven with a loving Creator. Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, let no one hinder them.' That's all I have for now."

"Thanks, Dr. Taylor," Jonathan said. "We'll take your calls when we return from these messages…"

The radio broadcast was six months ago. Jon's show and

its rebroadcasts and podcasts broke all records, and for a season, his was the most listened-to program of its type. Since then, Jon proved to be right in saying that the media and the government misled everyone, and he was wrong that anyone was "fine." No one is fine.

Jon felt inadequate to the reality he had uncovered and wanted a new direction, and as I suggested to him, he's considering applying to seminary to study Church History.

I don't want to tell you, reader, what we witnessed on those videos from the Xtra Space Storage Facility, because you won't believe me, and the more I press the point, the more you'd call me a fraud. Or, you'd laugh it off like you would a campy horror movie, one with the title, "Vengeance of the Bloody Fetuses." It's okay if you think I'm lying, or that I'm deluded, because what we saw *does not* align with anything we know is possible. But I will tell you what we saw, anyway. I'll tell you for the same reason we now share this entire story in print. Because, despite the staggering events of Lynchville, and, it appears now, in more distant places, after these few months, the country has gone back to normal.

That is what's scary.

Here is what we saw: The images are not clear, and the lighting was bad. The recording shifted from camera to camera… Lonnie Gillman arrived. He opened the doors, slapped at his legs, and fell. Then we noticed what looked like human fetuses of different sizes—lumps of flesh, really—dragging themselves and squirming along the ground, along the pavement. Some of the earlier ones were… they were flowing along in liquid—we guessed because of a glistening movement. We watched tortured hours of them crawling, creeping, rippling away until they all were gone.

END

“Crisper Bear”

“Crisper Crok”

“Crisper Crok”

The Greenlandic Windows

DAY ONE

The elderly woman in the wheelchair near the windows kept talking and talking in an endless, nonsensical monologue.

"What's she saying?" I asked Mr. Peterson, the caretaker, a thin tree-of-a-man planted on a stool beside an antique cash register.

The man shook his head, his tanned, wilted face the saddest I'd ever seen. "My wife of forty years," he said in a Scandinavian accent. "May I help you find something?"

I surveyed the gift shop-museum-kitchen with its single dining table covered with a white lace cloth. The man and his wife were the only people in the room, and apart from them, there was nothing of interest, not the books and postcards, not the ugly, creepy, ivory carvings and jewelry, not the dusty toiletries for the rare guest who forgot to bring them on the yacht from Iceland. "Do you have a local map?"

"A space-traveling vessel."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"It's nonsense, but Simigag talks in Greenlandic about a space vessel. I call her Ane."

He slipped a sheet of paper lined in colored contours onto the counter. "I've marked the trails and ruins. Avoid the cliffs on the north, here. They're dangerous. Stay away." He covered with his finger a band of dense lines at the top of the sheet. "People have plunged 500 meters into the fjord. The Curator, Ms. Jagland says you're a police officer in California, the wife of Jonathan T. Barron, the radio guy."

"Isabel. I *was* a police officer until our wedding last week," I said, folding the map and tucking it into my parka. He made me nervous. I felt like I was confronting a subject involved in petty mischief who smugly knew he'd never be punished. But I didn't want to be a cop anymore.

"Odd place for a… honeymoon," he said. "Are those the

right words? Honey and moon? I make a delicious amagergryde, a Danish ham stew, if you want me to cook."

"Thank you." I glanced again toward the woman engaged in a passionate, interminable, one-sided dialogue and opened the door to leave. She cried out and babbled faster and louder. I turned. She was glaring at me, the desperate, meaningless words pouring forth.

"Don't talk to her!" Peterson said, standing almost on top of me now. I recoiled at his proximity.

Annoyed by his imperious command, I walked up to Ane. In the midst of her noise, I asked, "How are you today?"

In the sudden silence that followed, Peterson leaned forward and mouthed, "Don't talk to her."

"I'm fine. How are you?" Ane said in crisp English, which was the last thing I expected.

The caretaker sashayed between us, putting his person and mine forehead to chin, he blinking down at me from a five-inch advantage, his breath stinking like spoiled fish. I pictured grabbing his skinny wrist, stepping backward, and twisting and forcing him onto the floor. Instead, on my honey and moon, as a *retired* cop, I just stepped backward.

The caretaker moved forward and blew in my face. "You're disturbing her."

Proving him right, or proving him a beast, Ane began shrieking.

Once outside the white-trimmed Danish-blue caretaker's house, I took a deep breath. A flight of a dozen or so white gulls glided overhead, flying south.

After my hike, I'd be sure to tell Jonathan—Jay—about the old lady and her spaceship. I pulled up my hood and worked my hands into gloves. It was early November on the northeastern coast of Greenland, clear sky, calm, mid-day, and the temperature hadn't climbed much higher than 30 degrees F. Jay called it a heat wave.

He had insisted I take a map along, in case I got lost. Lost? With no trees obstructing the views, and the mountain and the fjord as boundaries and landmarks, a person could only get

lost on purpose. Patches of ice and crisp snow in the brown and lichen-green landscape lent the air a nose-pinching feel like a deep freezer, one scented with dried herbs. I walked on and up. Jay had stayed behind with my toddler, Scotty, to allow me some independent time.

Soon the trail veered left, away from the fjord. Straight ahead on the map were the cliffs, though I couldn't see them. It seemed safe enough, so I ditched the trail and climbed the steeper ground north. The view opened wider and the ground seemed to end before me. Here at last on the right were cliffs, but unless I was reading the map wrong, not at all where they were shown. Gazing out to the fjord, I breathed in the pure air and the aesthetic starkness of rock, sky, and wide, expansive water flecked with white.

Across the fjord stood a much higher mountain, a pointed spire towering among other jagged peaks. A crack, then a deep rumble boomed across, an invisible icefall somewhere. Better if I moved away from the edge. Behind me and southwest a few hundred meters, rose a rock promontory, likely a safer place to rest. Moving on, in this remote, desolate place with only wildness in view, it was exciting to imagine that no human being had ever walked this ground.

My goal was further away than it looked, and by the time I reached it, I was sweating and removed my outer layers. The promontory was a fraud, however, because sloping tundra continued up behind it at a less steep incline. Funny, the map showed it as a sharp peak. I found a comfortable position on a square set of rocks. Far below, 2000 feet below and visible from my vantage point, was the caretaker's lodgings and the stone house where we were staying.

The House. You won't find anything about it on the official Greenland tourist website. It's not mentioned in guidebooks, nor in any publications whatsoever, popular or academic. The house is known only to a minute, elite orbit of people around the world, a group called "The Circle" that formed when the house was discovered in 1985.

Jay had been invited because of his sterling work as a

paranormal investigator and being the nationally known host of Strange Days Radio. The hope of his sponsors, that is, his fans, with the Circle, was that he would solve the mystery of the house. What it was, exactly. If he answered that question, he'd be released from the confidentiality agreement and could discuss the house on his radio program. While a few guests came as tourists and patrons, most, like Jay, had research skills. The privilege of announcing the existence of the house to the world was the reward for discovering its secret.

A sudden mist-laden breeze rose from the fjord, temporarily concealing the view, and feeling cold, I put my layers back on.

The ordinary opinion was that the house was built by early Icelandic explorers, but the real, scarcely spoken belief was that it was older. At the heart of the house's mystery was its technology. The Circle's curator, Dr. Marie Jagland told us the stone of the house had been drilled to pipe geothermic water for heat, so the house was comfortable during the bitterest winter weather. The windows—the original ones—were a combination of mica and fragments of glass. Most of the windows, however, had been updated with insulated glass, the original panes protected in the vaults of the Smithsonian.

The house was comprised of three levels, the first one half-buried. Each of the walls was trapezoidal and leaning inward. The roof, built with ancient metal trusses and shingled in slate, sloped from north to south in a single sweep.

My body was chilling in the same moments as my heart warmed by thinking about my two loves, my husband and Scotty, who was conceived in a previous momentary relationship. Jay and I had started dating just after an earthquake and a horrible, unbelievable incident in our hometown that threw us together. You'll have to find the podcast of Jay's broadcast about that event and listen to it yourself. My son was the best thing that ever happened to me, a result of my worst mistake…

I tossed several small stones into an ice-lined pool. The last stone in my hand, smooth and cream colored, caught my

attention. It wasn't a stone at all, but a piece of bone. The ground all around was covered with these ivory fragments, and I picked up a dozen of them. How odd this was, but when I picked up a tooth, an icy shiver shook my whole being, because it was a human molar, and my police forensic training and instinct warned that maybe all the bone pieces were human. I walked around the area in shock. The bones were piled into heaps a yard high, and when I looked closely, I saw they were chips and sections of femurs, skulls, digits, and the rest, covering about three acres of the mountainside.

I slipped through a back door to meet a loud, jolly tune echoing down the stairwell. The happy music grew louder as I tiptoed up. I poked my head around a corner. Jay, big and a tad overweight, and my short, compact hunk Scotty were standing in the middle of the living room's braided carpet, pumping up and down from their knees and twisting their bodies to the music while flapping their arms like chicken wings, wagging their index fingers, and grinning deliriously. I felt sad because my news would end our honeymoon, but this had always been a possibility. I thought their party should last a little longer, so I lilted onto the carpet, tossed my parka, hat, and gloves on the floor, and joined the fun.

The boys had been carrying on for some time, and they were ready to quit after a few minutes. "I've got hot cocoa ready for you," Jay said when he had shut down the music.

I asked him to open his hand and I dropped in it the pieces of bone, each fairly identifiable. As he rolled them like marbles in his palm, his face turned wolf-like with a penetrating focus that rendered all other considerations non-existent. This was the Jay I first met, and who didn't much appeal to me, but it was how he was good at his work.

"Where did you find these?"

I described the scene the best I could.

"Did you notice a stack of rocks, or a wall? A stone platform?"

"A rock outcrop."

"It might have been an altar. And so many people," he said to himself, now immersed in his mental process, which as he once explained, was like achieving the blank state of mind a person reaches in a warm shower.

"Do you want me to call the Curator on the satellite phone?"

"The Circle will be embarrassed that no one found this field before. It's too late today to go look. I suppose we should find someone to date the bones and begin excavating."

"It's certainly out of my expertise, but I'd say these bones are not that old, no more than a hundred years."

"They could be thousands of years old."

"I'll start supper," I said briskly, annoyed for having my opinion dismissed. I *had* taken an osteology course.

"Scotty and I already cut salmon steaks and vegetables, so it's ready to cook."

"Why, thank you. You have your uses."

"Maybe we should have Peterson prepare meals for us. That's provided for in what we paid."

"Peterson is creepy. His wife has mental problems. She talks to herself."

"I talk to myself."

"She carries on in an everlasting soliloquy to no one in particular."

"And?"

"It's Greenlandic. The husband says it's about spaceships."

A slow smile spread over Jay's face and seemed to fill his whole body as he stood up. Here was the Jay I fell in love with. He had the wolfish focus, but added to it was joy. "The bones are something, to be sure. But this, this discovery might explain all."

"But, she's crazy, right?"

"There's a chance it might be about something real." He jumped up and ran toward our bedroom. I picked up Scotty and followed, finding him rooting through his equipment.

"What are you planning?" I asked to his back.

"I'll record the woman."

"Without her knowing? Steer clear of Peterson."

"Without *anyone* knowing. Tonight."

"What about the bones?"

"Oh, yeah," Jay said, recalling. "Contact Dr. Jagland, will you? She'll know what to do. Is it too late to ask Peterson to cook tonight? We need an excuse to be over there."

NIGHT ONE

Our honeymoon was over, or so I thought. I ended up cooking for me and Scotty while Jay probably ate Peterson's Danish stew and made his covert video, but Jay was full of surprises. Much later that night I woke up with his hand on my hip. Fully clothed, he was sitting beside me in the dim light.

"Let's take an adventure," he said.

I grumbled, and he kissed me on the cheek. "Just be quiet so you don't wake Scotty, and get dressed. Meet me at the front door."

My clothes were laid out neatly on a chair. I rinsed my face, dressed, and found Jay holding a bundled-up Scotty, his chubby face composed in angelic slumber. I threw my parka on and followed Jay outside. Jay gave me a headlamp, but we didn't need them. The flaming, joyful stars above were wreathed by the pulsing, shooting green and purple aurora borealis. Jay headed down to the dock, and I hadn't gotten twenty yards before the breezy cold pierced my clothing.

"I'll be right back," I said, already trotting towards the house. Soon, enveloped by a goose down overcoat, I caught up with them. We reached the dock, and Jay turned up a path following the water's edge north. Before long, a rock hut emerged from the shadows. Inside the hut, a single oil lamp burned in one corner, and against the wall, a coal stove no bigger than an industrial soup pot glowed a blackened orange. Jay eased the bundled Scotty onto the stone floor and began stripping off his clothes.

"Wait," I said, dubious, even alarmed. "Ugh. It's too cold. Not here. Scotty might wake."

He just grinned sheepishly, and once down to his boxers, said, “Join me, if you like”, and hurried out the door back into the frost.

“What a wild man,” I muttered and followed with the headlamp to see what in the world he had in mind. A few steps ahead, I could see fog or steam drifting away from a wide pool. Jay was neck deep with his eyes closed.

“The water’s great,” he said dreamily. “It’s 86 degrees.”

I returned to the hut, hoisted the still snoozing Scotty, and set him down next to the pool. In a few minutes, I was cuddling with Jay and gazing at the sky, the breeze refreshingly cool on my face. “This reminds me of camping in the Sierras,” I said. “I was six years old. We borrowed a tent and stayed for one weekend. My parents were already old and tired by then—my next sibling was 18, you know. It was the last time Mama and Papa went anywhere, except day trips to the beach.” I sighed. Scotty rustled in his sleeping bag and smacked his lips. Jay waded over to check on him, and when he returned, I said, “I remember the stars, so brilliant and alive away from the city lights and smog. But I’ve never seen a sky more beautiful than this.”

“Inuit legends say the aurora borealis is the souls of dead children kicking around a walrus skull.”

“How romantic.”

“I’ll tell you something truly romantic.”

“Uh, huh.”

“The water isn’t heated from volcanism like in Iceland. Greenlandic hot springs originate from where deep layers of the earth’s crust rub together.”

I opened my mouth to rebuke him, but instead, on impulse rapped a knuckle, on a pressure point in his forearm.

“Ow,” he blurted and massaged his arm. “Wasn’t that geological fact romantic?”

“I don’t like coarse jokes.”

“Okay.” Jay didn’t ask for an explanation. He didn’t need another reminder about the vulgar innuendos directed to me and how I was denied a position as a school resource officer

when I got pregnant with Scotty.

"You know why I quit law enforcement work? Yeah, the sexual comments from other officers, behind my back, to my face in the hallway, the sly flirting… but it wasn't just that. I hurt people. I used too much force. I shot someone once. That kid from El Salvador. You fought in a war; you know how it feels."

He didn't say anything. Instead, he put his hand around my waist and pulled me toward him.

We were floating—

"Mommy," the little insistent voice said. "Mom-mee."

Jay released me and waded back to Scotty. "Hey. We're having a night swim, Buddy." He unwrapped and undressed Scotty, lowered him squealing into the water, and brought him to me. Then he reached up to a small cooler on the rocks, which had been there all along, I guess, and pulled out bottles and two wine glasses. "Hard cider."

"Sorry, Jay. Honeymooning with a toddler. What do you expect?"

He laughed. "Exactly this. It's just right."

"Sorry for hurting you. I really am enjoying this. It's the furthest and longest I've been away from home."

A snowflake settled on my eyelash, though the sky was cloudless. Jay turned on the headlamp to reveal more feathery snow floating by like dandelion umbrellas. "From the steam," he said.

We talked a while longer, then rushed back to the hut, dried off, and dressed. Scotty grinned and giggled the whole time. On the path to the house, I gazed up toward the promontory with the bone field behind it. A faint outline of stars traced the profile of the mountain.

One star, however… One wavering star crept up through the shadow.

"What's that?" Jay said.

"Someone."

"Who, I wonder?"

We watched for a minute. The light stopped, winked off

and then on, and kept climbing.

"Peterson, the caretaker," I said. "I don't like him. No one else but he and his wife are here, yet, right?"

DAY FIVE

Within three days the Circle had invited a dozen world-renowned archeologists and paleontologists who proceeded to withdraw from classrooms, committee meetings, concert halls, or away from remote, inaccessible, career-enhancing digs, and who had thrown their toothbrushes and extra underwear into duffels, grabbed their toolkits, and chased down the next flights to Reykjavík from Tokyo, Beijing, Bombay, Jo-burg, Tel Aviv, Berlin, Chicago, Bozeman and Sidney. The Curator, Dr. Jagland, arrived first from Oslo and relegated our family to our private bedroom, while the rest of the Greenland House, plus the caretaker's residence, had been co-opted for the incoming scientists and service staff.

Jay, carrying Scotty in a backpack, and I began walking down the mountainside after observing their work at the already gridded and partially excavated bone yard. We had *attempted* to observe. Chilling fog and stiff rain squalls laced with snow rushed down the mountain toward the fjord, obscuring our views from the "promontory".

"If these rocks are not an altar, as the archeologists now say, what explains the bones?" I asked Jay.

A freshening gust of wind blew Jay's hood off. Scotty sucked in a deep breath as if the wind was suffocating him. "I can't believe they're working in this weather," I shouted.

We gave up trying to talk until we reached the house, fought our way through the basement door, and hung our wet things to dry in the toasty, tectonic heat. Jay said, "The bone field can only tell us what *wasn't* happening here, and we know that already, so they're wasting their time."

The house was reputedly impervious to weather, either of drafts, leaks, or sounds, and we couldn't tell if a storm was raging outside, so when Scotty slipped in a puddle at the foot of the stairs that led to the uppermost floor, we were puzzled. I

looked up at the ceiling, but Jay went to the front door. "Someone tracked in a lot of snow."

"Everyone is on the mountainside." I reached for my sidearm, which of course wasn't there, since they're illegal for non-citizens.

Jay trotted up the stairs.

I hoisted Scotty and followed to find Jay in the doorway of one of the bedrooms, from which a relentless chanting of "ba, ba, ba, ba" issued. He stepped aside to let me in. There, next to the bed, was Peterson, bent over his wife in the wheelchair. Her head was flopped sideways, one arm was waving in random circles, and it was she who was chanting.

"She's had an aneurysm or something," Peterson said in a thick voice speaking weakly with the top of his lungs. "She's to die in the house. It's in her papers."

"Her advance directives?"

"She doesn't want a doctor. No interventions."

I'm not medically trained beyond first aid, but the woman appeared to me like she wasn't dying; there was some fire within her that wouldn't extinguish easily. I felt her forehead. "She's feverish. She should be on antibiotics."

"Not if she's terminal. We can't risk going to the hospital. She must die in the house."

"Why?" Jay asked, aglow with the excitement he displays when he thinks he's on the verge of a discovery.

Peterson shrugged. "I love her, and must honor her wish."

"But," I said, beginning to explain how there was no room in the stone house, that we couldn't send away the archeologist and his assistants who had crammed into this space, when Jay led me out into the hallway. The ba, ba, ba chanting grew louder.

"They—the archeologists—can have our bedroom," Jay said. "We'll move to the main room."

"We booked the whole house, paid for it in advance. None of these people should be here."

"Listen," he said, "this woman may open the mystery. Hundreds of people, possibly thousands of years ago, came to

this location, either against their will to be killed, or voluntarily to die naturally. Maybe there's a connection. Solving the mystery is why we came, right? I have an idea. The caretaker's house has backpacking tents. I'll put one up in the front room and keep everyone else out." He didn't wait for me to respond, but dashed away.

"I can't lift her alone," Peterson was saying, clearly intending to put her into one of the beds.

DAY SEVEN

Now that the Greenland House was jammed with people, including Peterson and Ane, his fiercely vital, incoherent wife supposedly dying in our bedroom, the only semi-quiet place was the public part of the caretaker's house. I was making a late breakfast in the kitchen area while Jay and Dr. Jagland at the table gazed at the persistent, impenetrable fog outside the window. Scotty toddled around the floor with his charming stalking gait, his body bouncing side to side with each deliberate footfall. He looked so confident and manly, but he still crossed his legs up and tripped every other minute. He never said a word, but just got back on his feet and toddled on, around and around in circles, handing Jay an empty plastic cup. Jay slurped air noisily and gave the cup back to Scotty.

Dr. Jagland was elegantly slender and toned in her tailored Caribou fur and white leather costume and stiff boots. Were it not for her passion for the most mysterious architectural treasures of the planet, she might have wasted her life in a long career as a movie star or model. Jay had said she had never married. She shook herself from some inner meditation, breaking a long lull. "How long does Simigag have?"

"A hospice nurse arrived by float plane this morning," Jay said. "She said another day or two. The woman will die of dehydration, eased by morphine on the tongue."

Jagland seemed to have nothing to say.

I knew what Jay was thinking and that he wouldn't comment, so I said it from the kitchenette. "She's not terminal.

She might have had a stroke, but they could treat her. She's mentally ill." I knew it made no difference, and there was nothing we could do to intervene to prevent the hastening of her death, but I had to say the truth.

"I must be frank, Mr. Barron, the spaceship idea is ludicrous, and I'd rather not discuss it anymore. Your wife's discovery of the bone field, however, is immense, second only to the importance of the house. There was a sophisticated Paleolithic settlement here. We may find other buildings buried under nearby ice. I think the Circle will allow you to reveal the house to the world on your radio program tomorrow. You've won the prize."

"We need more information. Unlike most of these guys on the airwaves, I'm not a sensationalist, ma'am. The house is fascinating, but the bone field is still unexplained. My radio program is about real things, fantastic but real. I hate to be callous, but I'm waiting to see what happens when the woman dies."

"Jay," I said, bringing a platter of sausage and eggs to the table. "You're awful."

"So, Mr. Barron, you believe a spaceship will come hovering over the Greenland House to take the woman's soul to Paradise?"

"What's the current population of Greenland?"

"Fifty-six thousand."

"How many crushed skeletons are on the mountainside?"

Jagland spread her hands to say no one could be sure.

"It's possible a huge number of people once believed something of the sort," Jay said. "It's possible this woman who lived here for years picked up some impulse from the house about its true purpose. As a way station."

"You said you weren't a sensationalist."

"I speculate. It's my investigative process."

Several wordless minutes passed while they stuffed in food, Jagland keeping up with Jay, forkful by forkful. I sat Scotty onto a pillow on a chair and tied him in. He joined their stuffing party, while I rinsed fruit for my smoothie.

Jagland pushed away from the table and stood up. “Thank you dearly for the breakfast, Mrs. Barron. I’m sorry your vacation didn’t turn out to be much of a holiday.” She stepped to the coat rack near the door and began working into her fur overcoat. “I’ll let you know the Circle’s decision about announcing the house. I’m positive they’re ready to reveal its existence—frankly, it will help in securing funding. Important patrons are arriving this afternoon. Meanwhile, I’m off to the dig. We hope to find tools of slaughter deeper down today.”

With that, Jagland made her departure.

“More people,” I muttered to myself, then, “This will be loud,” I said, and turned on the food processor. At the spurt of grinding, chopping noise, I couldn’t help but imagine the dismembering of human bodies. I brought the smoothie to the table. “What’s on for today?”

“What we planned. You go for your exercise walk and later sit with the old woman. I play with Scotty. For a start, he and I’ll wash dishes. Be sure to take map and compass. I’ll give you my pistol. You’ll feel safer if you meet old Peterson in the dark.”

“Pistol? You brought a firearm? I don’t believe it.”

“I always bring a gun. An H&K .45 caliber. It’s a part of my work kit.”

I only took a map, compass, a headlamp, and the satellite phone. As I’ve said, I didn’t want to be a cop anymore. Since the freezing fog obliterated the scenic views, I expected not to linger—a quick march up and back, just enough to help me sleep. It was past sunset, which at that time of year was about 2:30 pm, but there was plenty of light. I wanted to be back early enough to read to Ane. She had stopped swallowing, and because Peterson had medical power of attorney, he refused to put her on an IV drip. I was angry, and depressed from being unable to help. I felt like when my own elderly parents died when I was in high school. All I could do for Ane now was read to her from the Psalms in the Bible. It gave her peace, I know, because while I read, she stopped chanting,

At some point, I heard disembodied voices ahead in the fog, loud voices in multiple languages. It took a while for the bodies to reach me, the workers and scientists descending from the dig. I stepped aside to let them pass, and many said *hello* and *be careful*. The voices moved down the mountain, and I continued on the trail, turning left away from the cliffs and the bone yard.

Time passed, and I had been occupied in thinking about calling a lawyer in Nuuk tomorrow about Ane. I checked the satellite phone. I had been walking uphill for almost an hour. Time to turn around.

It was darkening, but I decided to not put the headlamp on until I couldn't see the trail. When I passed the new trail leading up to the bone yard, a lumpish figure emerged from the textured fog below.

"Jay," I called, thinking he might have hiked up to meet me. "Jay?" The figure didn't answer, but kept trudging forward. When I stopped, it did, and this is when I turned the headlamp on, high beam.

Peterson with a slack burlap bag slung over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He dropped the bag, looked up at me, and drew a long knife. "You shouldn't be here," was all he said.

Once again, I reached for my absent gun and wished I had brought Jay's.

He paused, and seeing my empty hand, he advanced, holding the knife ready to slash. I stepped off the trail, hoping to run around him, but he was steady on the ice and rock, and I was not. "What do you want, Mr. Peterson?" I asked, hoping to touch something reasonable. "I'm not sure what you want, sir."

"I want to go home, to Denmark," he said, coming closer and shifting the knife to a stabbing position. "It's depressing here. I need money to return to Denmark. I told you to stay away from the cliffs. They're dangerous. People fall to their deaths."

He ran at me and I fell. I grabbed a rock. When I regained

my feet, he was right there and lunging. All I remember is arching away from the knife and pounding his arm. He yelled in pain and dropped the knife. Then I had him on the ground in a stranglehold, both of us rolling together downhill. When we stopped, I tightened the hold until he stopped struggling, then I untangled myself and jumped up, but he didn't move. I tapped him with my boot, then bent down to check his vitals.

Nothing. I might have killed him. I had cut off the blood flow to his brain and killed him. Maybe.

I'm not sure how I packed Peterson on my shoulder as far as I did. Adrenaline, I guess, and guilt. Jay met me halfway, and I transferred my burden to him. He was somber and silent, preoccupied with something else, I guess. I was too depressed to ask him what it was as I trudged behind, adding my headlamp's beam to his, and with the fog sweeping over us, all we could see was our feet and a moving patch of ground. Within a sphere of its own light, the house, diminutive at first, grew larger moment by moment, each window projecting a distinct glowing rectangle. When we arrived, Jay asked me to open the door.

"Shouldn't we leave the body outside?" I said.

"Are you a doctor, love? He's not dead. He's been groaning for the last few minutes."

Inside, the house was strangely quiet. Jay carried Peterson into the front room while I removed my outer layers near the door. I was sitting on a chair and undoing my boots as Jagland came in holding Scotty. Her face looked radiant, like an angel who beheld both terror and joy without either weakening the other.

"I have bad news," she said, handing Scotty to me. "Ane died while you were gone. I'm sorry you weren't here." She paused, and I could tell it was awkward for her to affect sadness, because she wasn't sad in the slightest. Sad was too weak a word for how I felt. "But you need to see this," she said.

I followed her into our front room, crowded with people

facing the front window. They had taken down our tent. Jay was fiddling with one of his video cameras on a tripod. The crowd parted for me. I walked up and stopped at a waist-high stone bench that hadn't been there before. What should have been visible from the windows was darkness and fog. Instead, stars bigger and more brilliant and colorful than possible, like photographs from the Hubble telescope, but this was 3-D real.

"Closer," Jay said, nudging me. "Look down into the frame."

My arms trembling from fatigue, I put Scotty on the bench and stepped around. The stars were down there too, where outside it would be the bulk of the Earth.

"We are seeing the stars through the edge of the planet in their true positions," Jagland said from behind me. "Every window in the house is like this. Every star in the sky is visible. I think we will see them even after sunrise. In comparison, this… this makes Stonehenge as primitive as…"

"A boy's building blocks," I said.

Jay was standing next to Scotty to ensure he didn't fall off the bench, and Scotty was flat on his stomach, wriggling and feeling the stone, rubbing his hands over the smooth, glossy surface. What happened next was exactly like when you are flying, and the jet hits an air pocket; everyone feels it at the same time, and someone screams. I was facing Jay and Scotty, and I had to take a step forward to catch myself. A woman next to me sat down hard on the floor and squealed. One gentleman said, "Earthquake?" and everyone else began blabbing at once, Jay's excited voice above the others. "I saw them. The stars blurred." He ran to the front door and threw it open. Fog swirled around him. "Damn," he roared, "We're still on Earth. Or, I think so. Nobody touch that bench!"

Scotty was on the bench, dangling his feet and looking at everyone in wonder. I snatched him into my arms. Feeling all the eyes staring at him, he puckered up and cried.

NIGHT SEVEN

The crowded front room had been our only private space,

so we had no option but to shoo people off a corner couch and claim it as our own. I hummed a lullaby to Scotty while Jay saw that Peterson was restrained and watched—they moved him to the bedroom with Ane's body. I kept wishing I could have done more for her. Jay returned, plopped next to me, and put his arm around my shoulder. Our honeymoon had compacted to this—our threesome on a couch in a room full of smart people gazing at the stars through an enchanted window. Jagland moved among the crowd and whispered in people's ears. I read her lips saying, "The family requires quiet. Please observe at one of the other windows." People edged away until only a handful was left…

"The portal faded." That was Jay's voice beside me, waking me up. He pushed himself off the couch and stretched, flexing his shoulders backwards. The room was empty. Through the window now, fog had regained the lower sky, but a few smudgy stars sailed up high.

"The stone bench sunk into the floor," Jay said. He ran his hand over the glass, and at his movement, the brilliant stars sprang back in the view. "Ah, still active." He turned on his headlamp and peered closely at the framework. I carefully set Scotty down, fast asleep, on the couch and covered him with a blanket.

"Apparently," Jay said, "when they installed modern windows, they didn't alter the stone framework. The rock is the same as the bench," he said, kneeling on the floor.

"I need to do some things," I said, giving Jay a kiss.

"It's 2:00 a.m., you know."

"I've had a nap," I said over my shoulder and ran up the stairs.

Our old room on the second floor blazed with light. With his eyes closed, a muscley grad student was leaning back in an easy chair next to the bed while clutching a sheaf of papers. The hospice nurse on a cot on the far side of the room was snoring gently. Peterson, wide awake on his side with his hands lashed to the bed frame, glared at me. Behind him lay Ane, flat on her back with her arms folded on her chest, her

head propped up, her face with its sunken cheeks immobile, and her body motionless, reminding me of my dead mother. A warm wave of sorrow rose up and softened my frozen feelings. I breathed in shallow breaths until the sadness passed, and I turned to leave.

"Dim the damn lights, will you?" Peterson said.

I tiptoed downstairs to find Jay sound asleep on the couch with Scotty in his arms. I collected my goose down overcoat and gloves, and passing Jagland's office that she had set up in a utility closet, I heard her urgent voice inside speaking a Middle Eastern language.

Outdoors, it seemed the view from the windows had extended to the sky, sweeping it clear of fog, and even of the aurora borealis. I stopped and stared.

A feeling of motion, like being on a boat, made me believe I was falling. I hunkered down and touched one hand to the ground. From the rocky shore below rose the sound of waves laden with chunks of ice rumbling back and forth, but without wind to generate the agitation. Overhead, it seemed the stars were growing more intense. I imagined looking down at myself and the stone house growing smaller and slipping to the side. Everything below became dark, then speckled with flaming orange clusters until a bright bulge emerged from an orb and grew into a crescent that broke free—the sunrise over Earth from a thousand miles high, and the Moon opposite, which all shrank until the rotating Earth disappeared, and the Sun dwindled into a diminishing pinpoint of light spiraling among millions of other points. But all along in the picture, I knew exactly where I was, crouching on the path to the caretaker's house.

After shaking myself to reestablish the illusion of the planet's fixedness, I completed the short distance to the caretaker's house and pushed open the door to the dark gift shop. Body bags covered the floor. Full body bags in my headlamp's beam, and my heart and breath jumped into turbo. Peterson's work! One of the bags rolled over and mumbled grumpily, "Turn out that light."

Oh. The overflow slept here. "Sorry," I mumbled, dimmed the headlamp, picked my way across, and eased through the door into the caretaker's living space.

Cardboard boxes lined the hallway and were stacked into a neat cube nearly head high in the middle of the sitting room. On one side of the room was a coal stove, still warm, and near it a wooden table. Upstairs, two locked suitcases had been placed ready for a traveler to pick up, one for each hand. I pulled out the drawers. All were empty. The closet was empty. The bathroom had been cleaned and still smelled of disinfectant. Downstairs again—the boxes were sealed and labeled for shipping. Peterson was prepared to bolt for Denmark, obviously, but to learn anything about his money situation and why he attacked me, I'd have to open boxes. I returned to the cube and stared at it before I lifted one of the boxes. It was soft and silent, full of clothing, maybe, women's clothing, by the odor of Ane's perfume. Here was a clue—an empty box with its flaps up.

"Need help?"

Startled, I jerked around ready to fight. Whew. It was Jay who laughed and said, "I knew you'd be here."

"Okay. I need to inspect these boxes. If I'm to open any without a warrant, I need probable cause." I smiled and said, "Glad you're here. I assume someone's watching Scotty."

"Jagland's talking with the astronomers, but she's keeping an eye on him. Shouldn't you wait for Greenland authorities?"

Anger surged through me, and sorrow. "The authorities don't care about Ane! They don't care if Peterson hastened her death, that he murdered her."

Jay was smart. He put his arms around me before saying, "Isn't it obvious that Peterson was carving bones and selling them?"

Of course. I tried to push away from Jay, but he held tighter. How did he figure this out so easy? I wanted to help Ane and couldn't. I wanted to help my mom and dad, and couldn't. I wanted to punish my older brother and sister for killing my parents, for hastening their deaths. I wanted to

punish Peterson for killing Ane. But stealing bones from an archeological site compared to Ane and my parents? It just didn't matter. It was invisible to me. I'd have to hit it head-on.

I felt so helpless. I pictured Ane's desiccated face, her drooping, silent mouth, and sunken eye sockets. Her thin hands, her brushed hair. All of my feelings about Scotty and Jay, our busted honeymoon, leaving the police force, being bitter toward my siblings, being left behind by my parents, my inability to help them, all surged into an overwhelming sorrow that dissolved the construct enabling me to function, to present a composed persona… For a few minutes, I cried like I hadn't since I was sixteen.

Jay held me until I leaned away from him and sat down in a chair.

"Mom died first and then Dad," I said, my voice clouded. "She had been sick a long time, and collapsed over the course of a month, and then Dad withered away, probably dying of heartbreak and loneliness, if nothing else. Except they starved him on purpose. All of this passed me by in a blinding blur. I was the only one still living at home, and as soon as they put Dad in a nursing facility, my oldest brother made me leave my school and friends in Lynchville to move in with him in San Diego. My sister and the rest of them handled the medical and funeral decisions."

"That's how you ended up attending the police academy in San Diego," Jay said.

"Yeah."

We were quiet for a while, just thinking—me about Mom and Dad's flower bed in our decayed neighborhood overrun by Mexican gangs. Then I thought about how small all of this was compared to the vision of the stars I had seen outside. I stood up and looked at the cube of boxes. "How did you discover Peterson's scheme?"

He pulled a figure from his pocket. "I brought this from the gift shop, from the glass case."

I took the carving in hand, a yellow, dog-like monster with a tiny human skull, its tongue sticking out, walking on its

knees and elbows, and ribs sharp and circling its torso like threads of a bolt. I thrust it back to Jay. "It's hideous."

"It's a cross between a Malacandrian sorn and a pfifltrigg. It's called a tupilak, and they're associated with witchcraft. Peterson is a skilled carver. Some of his figures are polar bears and such for children—but a few in the case are stranger than this one."

"Made from human bone."

Jay lifted down a smaller box from the cube. "This one addressed to Fairbanks probably contains carvings. I guess many of these big boxes are stuffed with uncarved bones he intended to ship to Denmark."

"When will the authorities pick him up tomorrow?" I asked. "I'm afraid he might get free."

"After the broadcast."

DAY EIGHT

"We're moving," a strange voice said in my dream.

I opened my eyes and sat up. Our bedroom—the darkened front room of the stone house—was once again full of silent people staring at the star-jeweled window. Scotty was playing a wordless patty-cake with a blonde female grad student, and Jay was standing next to our couch holding a coffee cup, his chest rising and falling. He leaned over and whispered breathlessly, "The entire solar system is moving."

This made no sense, because, of course, the solar system is moving. Once on my feet, I said, "How long have I been sleeping?"

He looked at his wristwatch like it was a new discovery. "Ten in the morning," he said and drifted closer to the window.

"Wait," I said, and before he got too far away, I snatched his coffee cup, while noticing people watching as if pausing for us to finish our conversation.

The strange voice from my dream again spoke from near the window full of living stars, from a short man wearing an Arabian headdress. "Many of you know already, in the past

nine hours we've corroborated with astronomers around the planet, and it's incontrovertible that the solar system has moved, is presently moving away from the galactic path it has held to since mankind kept records. I and my assistants compared historic star maps with the current, still evolving, configuration of celestial bodies, and we have traveled approximately…" Here he paused.

One of the people sitting against the wall with laptops looked up and said, "271 light-years."

"271 light years," the Arabian man said.

"272," the laptop person corrected.

"Okay, we are moving at unimaginable speed. Looking at the window, you might not tell with the naked eye the minute changes in the angels, I mean angles—sorry—of the major stars. The vast distances of space preclude you from detecting dramatic changes, just as you would not notice the stars spinning overhead on a clear night as the Earth rotates at 1675 kilometers per hour. The Earth circles the sun at 107,000 kilometers an hour. Our solar system normally plods along at 70,000 kilometers an hour in the direction of the bright star Vega in constellation Lyra, giving our planets a beautiful vortex motion. All this remained the same for eons, but now our speed and direction have altered."

As I watched the window, I couldn't see movement, but I felt as if the heavens before us were pulsing, as if some heart was pumping its lifeblood through the cosmos and some mind directed the busy, infinitely complex traffic. Could the universe be the body of God? I wondered what my Spanish priest at home would say.

The Arabian man was still speaking…

"So, we have few answers. We don't know how we can travel faster than light. It's impossible as we understand physics. What we can say is that the tug every sentient person in the world felt at 5:46 PM, GMT on November 12 was the breaking of inertia. The solar system accelerated imperceptibly in a new direction, and now it's decelerating. The ocean waves that the jolt generated were worldwide, and

apart from a few floods of low-lying areas, damage and injury were minimal. The sun, or Solar, is in a quiescent phase, like nothing we've known. Perhaps the sun is the energy plant for our journey. Lastly, back to where I began, the solar system is moving as a whole. All of the planets from Mercury to the reinstated Pluto are all in their proper places. We are moving as a family."

Before the Arabian guy finished, Jagland had stepped forward to raise her hand, and she spoke the instant he stopped. "Dr. al-Saghani won't be taking questions right now—he's traveled all night to get here—but there's one item I must mention. Of course, the dig on the mountain will continue. Now that we know something about the house, it may give a basis to theorize about the bone field, which in turn will help us understand what's happening in the heavens. But I want to introduce to you the person who will explain to the world what we know so far. Anyone who is paying attention is wondering. Many people are scared. They feel a literal cosmic shift, but they have no idea what's happening. That's why as soon as we break here, we're setting the room up as a sound studio to broadcast by satellite to the entire world. We can't wait a moment longer. Already, rumors are circulating, and astronomers are publicly speculating. Needless to say, charlatans will find a way to mislead and exploit. There's only one person on the planet who has enough credibility in matters like this. His experience in what we call the paranormal has been validated scientifically in every case. Not only is his investigative technique impeccable, his is a man of subtle and unfailing intuition. He always seems to be in the right place. And I can see by how he's acting that this praise makes him uncomfortable because of another of his character traits. Humility. I give you Jonathan T. Barron."

The applause was in fact subdued, but it thundered in my ears. Jay was kind and smart, and as only a few people knew, was competent with firearms and covert military ops, but I had never given regard to his celebrity status. Well, he was on radio and seldom made personal appearances, so people hardly

ever got a look at him. Right now, he was beet red, but his discomfiture did not affect his voice.

"Thanks," he said simply. "We hope to broadcast live within the hour. There's no time to talk with anyone beforehand, but if you have any questions for me or Professor al-Saghani, umm, give them to my wife, Isabel, and she'll screen them, and recopy them if necessary to make them legible. Is that okay, love?"

"Sure enough," I said.

"And I need to introduce someone else really special. He's a natural, a true scientist and explorer, blundering into discoveries that changed…" As he glanced at me, I thought he might cry, but he got out, "changed everything. He's the person who launched humanity, the world, the sun, and all the planets into a journey to a place unknown. Our son, Scotty, right there, and please, please don't let him climb onto that stone bench again."

Everyone laughed.

By lunchtime, the house's front room, our "honeymoon suite" and then conference room, had been transformed into a broadcast studio. Jay stood by and supervised the arrangement of tables and chairs, video cameras for the news conference, microphones, the mixer board, and the satellite linkups, and then he tested it all with the engineer from North Carolina. It all came together at the last moment for airtime.

The first part of the broadcast was to be a straightforward reiteration of what we knew already and a Q&A, but a version for the whole world—or anyone who cared to watch, which Dr. Jagland estimated would be a billion people. The timing of the televised news conference roughly coincided with Jay's regular weekly program, so there was supposed to be only a commercial station-break between them, Jay's program to follow on radio only, and be, as he said, "exploratory, risky, and much more interesting."

"We are live," Jay's engineer said.

Jay, Jagland, and Professor al-Saghani fielded the half-

dozen questions from the crews, giving extended, more-or-less varied adaptations of "We don't know," and they were about to wrap up the televised part when we heard shouting and what sounded like a body tumbling down the stairs. A woman gasped, another screamed, then Peterson marched into the room, his chest heaving, his face twitching, and gripping a shotgun in both hands.

"The keys to the yacht," he said, hoarsely. "Where are they?"

Since he was live, Jay kept talking, and when no one answered Peterson's question, he let the shotgun swing on its sling, pulled a knife, and grabbed Scotty, who just happened to totter by. Peterson babbled on about needing help loading his boxes, and Jay kept talking—his hands twitching behind his back while saying, "So, the solar system is galloping across the galaxy at impossible speeds, and the charnel remains of hundreds, maybe thousands of human beings lie on the mountainside above us, but as yet we have no answers, no information to link this house—that is, the command center—with the bones."

At this, Peterson's head jerked up, and I walked behind Jay, leaned down, and took the pistol he'd been flicking, its hammer back and ready to fire. Scotty began crying, sensing the tension and being squeezed by Peterson, who now held the point of his knife at our child's heart.

"This concludes our worldwide news conference," Jay said, "but for more discussion, stay tuned for my regular program, Strange Days Radio, when we will pick up with some guesswork, and hopefully dramatic new information. If your station doesn't carry my program, you may listen at www.chaoticterrain.com."

Peterson had been talking during this and was saying, "The answer is, people think the house will carry them to Heaven."

Jay flicked his glance to me and made a cutting gesture at his throat, supposedly to tell the engineer to cut the feed, but I took it as a sign. Peterson's knife was waving in the air as he

spoke, and I raised Jay's pistol and froze, then an eternity-in-a-second later I shot Peterson twice cleanly in the head. Jay had vaulted the table and snatched Scotty as Peterson jerked backward to the floor and began convulsing in his death throes.

The big picture window clouded for an instant and revealed the stars again.

People had been screaming, muttering, cursing, praying out loud, and shouting in response to the shots, and in a brief silence that followed, the engineer said, "Okay, people. We are in a station break, top of the hour. We're live again, on radio, in… four and a half minutes. Somebody better look at that guy."

I sank into the nearest chair and watched through an emotional stupor. Jay had been talking to me. I glanced up and he said, "Are you all right?" in a tone that told me he'd already asked several times. I nodded, and he slipped the gun from my hand, removed the clip, cleared the chamber, and set it all on the table. Then he put Scotty in my lap and kissed me on top of the head. Scotty gave me a perfunctory hug and slipped to the floor.

One of the archaeologists knelt down next to Peterson. "He's dead, totally. Shouldn't we call Emergency Services, or its Greenlandic equivalent?"

Someone said, "We're way too remote. The police are due now, anyway."

Someone else covered Peterson with a blanket, and Scotty ran to investigate, but the blonde graduate student caught him up and said, "Let's go upstairs and play." Before I knew it, everyone was in place, Jagland, Professor al-Saghani, and the producer was counting down.

"We're skipping the theme music," Jay said quickly, and then he was talking in his professional voice, though more somber than usual.

"Dear Friends. Welcome to Strange Days Radio, a special broadcast following up on the international press conference where we shared what we've discovered here at the

Greenlandic House on the east coast of Greenland. I'm sure many of you watched, and you may have heard shouting in the background in the final seconds. That voice you heard belonged to the long-time caretaker of this site, a Mr. Peterson. Peterson is dead. He died just now. In fact, his body is lying on the floor a few yards from me. Mr. Peterson had taken my son Scotty hostage with a carving knife, and in the last moments before he was shot, Peterson gave us a clue that pulls together everything we know about this place. We are improvising here, folks, so bear with me… Mr. Engineer, please roll the Ane Peterson tape, it's number one. And Dr. Jagland, will you translate? Put on those headphones. Mr. Engineer, after four seconds, pull the gain back on Ane's voice so it's barely heard. While they're cueing up, I'll explain that Ane appeared to have a mental illness, and I recorded her babbling without her knowledge. No one has heard this recording before. She died yesterday as a result of a serious infection. Ready?"

The engineer said, "Go."

Jagland paused to take in Ane's first words and began translating in a halting rhythm, a mixture of pauses, slow phrasing, and spurts. I listened for a moment and moved to the couch. This is what Jagland said Ane was saying:

"I said, 'The American girl stared at me with a mixture of fear and pity.' Maybe she will listen. 'The spaceship will take us to Heaven,' I said to her. 'It's a long, long way. If we die in the house,' I said to Peterson, 'once the spaceship arrives, we can climb aboard and it will take us to Heaven.' We must die in the house, and the ship will arrive. But I told my first husband, 'The souls of the whales that you killed in the bay went to Heaven. I saw the ship with my own eyes. It was made of wheels, dear, wheels and balls spinning around, with a giant light in the middle. Our baby that died, her soul is floating in the auroras, she's playing football… soccer up there in the night sky…' That Mr. Peterson, I don't like him. He's not trustworthy. He doesn't sleep with me, at all. He never did. Our ceremony was meaningless. Three years of so-called

marriage. He took my money, but I'm so close. It's what matters. Death is near. Those bones, so many like me—they reached Heaven. His carvings are nasty. The spaceship approaches. It's there, drawing me like a lover. 'This world is sad and full of pain,' I said, 'the American girl with amber skin, maybe she's Inuit.' I hope she comes back to see me. I like her. The spaceship is a chariot, a dog sled to Heaven. 'If only I can die in the house,' I said, 'then my life will be complete.'"

Jagland paused as Ane's voice rambled on. "She's repeating herself," Jagland said. "There's nothing new."

"We can listen later," Jay said. "Ordinarily, we'd break for a commercial, but this is too important. My sponsors will understand—they're listed on my website. I've been thinking during Dr. Jagland's translation, and I believe I have a more complete picture now of what this means. But, frankly, I need a break. Mr. Engineer. Have you got one minute of appropriate music? Okay, I'll be back."

The engineer stared blankly for three silent seconds, his stoic face then morphed into a grin and he plugged in his phone and cued up some pulsing, golden, harp and violin music.

Jay came over to me, lifted me to my feet, and hugged me, nearly squeezing the life out of me. I could tell he was crying. Me? I felt numb and let his emotion melt through me. "I'm sorry you had to shoot him, but thank you for saving Scotty," he said, his voice trembling in a way I've never heard before. "I love you," he said, kissed me, and trotted back to his microphone.

He let the music play to the end and said, "I'm back. However urgent or desperate or important your life is folks, never neglect your family. The news will come out later, but my wife has just gone through the most difficult experience she'll ever face, and she and I needed a little private time. Okay. Here's my speculation on this whole story. Um, first some questions."

"Dr. Jagland, is it true that the Greenlandic House was

built before the arrival of the Europeans?"

"Correct."

"Is there any building in the world like it?"

"It's unique. The technology is unknown."

"Is it true that the archaeologists have not found an altar at the site with the bones?"

"It doesn't appear that ancient human sacrifice took place here."

"When do you believe the house was built?"

"Archaeologists have many opinions, but *my* best assessment is that it predates the historical period."

"So, how old?"

"Before 10,000 BC."

"And the first humans came to Greenland when?"

"2500 BC. Umm. I fear to say it professionally, but I believe the house is as old as the Earth, once it cooled."

"Professor al-Saghani, is the solar system still moving in its new direction?"

"It is, but it's slowing. It could stop at any moment. Or at least resume its normal speed and direction."

"Thank you. Here's my speculation."

Jay sighed big and began. "Ages ago, an advanced race of beings built the solar system to be a space traveling vessel. The sun is the power source, the Earth the living quarters, and the other planets, by means beyond our comprehension, form the engine of locomotion. It is by far larger than any spaceship imagined by the most inventive science-fiction writers, and it's really real. The house here is a control center for the vessel. Where these beings came from or where they went, we'll never know. It's possible they looked like Greenlandic carvings of the dog-like monster, the tupilak, and folklore preserved their image. The purpose of the solar system as a space vehicle was to carry this race of beings someplace, to a place of idyllic beauty and harmony. A place like what most of us yearn for—one without conflict, pain, or death. A place of continuous, eternal joy and peace, of life everlasting. A return to Eden, or the Kingdom of Heaven. From our

experience on this present Earth—the wars, genocides, famines—I'm guessing that our planet never arrived at this place. The vessel wandered the universe for eons and ages unknown. Perhaps the place never existed, or perhaps the vessel simply was not the correct means to reach Heaven. Many Earth traditions believe that people can reach Heaven only through death. In particular, one of our dominant traditions claims that only through the sacrifice of the Creator's child could the portal to Heaven be opened. This extinct race of stellar engineers apparently thought they could find another way. The space vessel then, represents a marvelous, ingenious, though ultimately failed attempt.

"Well, that's my speculation. Now for the bones. It seems clear that a human death activates the controls in the house, which in turn change the solar system's direction and speed." He paused for a second, and then as if to himself, muttered, "But, what if we learn to work the controls ourselves?" He whistled softly, and then continued. "The house emanates a spiritual magnetism, drawing people here. It triggers a yearning for Heaven and gives people a vision it can never fulfill. The bones on the mountainside are from those who, for centuries, came from around the planet to die. It's simple. And it's tragic and odd.

"As I mentioned, and I hope I'm not too macabre, but a few feet from where I am speaking, the corpse of the caretaker of this site, Mr. Peterson, awaits the legal authorities of Greenland. Peterson was a talented carver of ivory and bone. But there was something not right about Mr. Peterson, and it's more than the fact that he attacked my wife yesterday and today grabbed our 16-month-old son, threatening to stab him in the heart. We have here (he nodded to a graduate student) a box Mr. Peterson had packed for shipping to Denmark, his home country. We're opening this package now. I'm not sure what we'll find, but a grad student is cutting the box open and removing the tissue paper that wraps a heavy, irregularly shaped object. If my guess is correct… I suggest you wear gloves."

The student handed the object, a flat bone, about the shape of an ear, a grossly oversized ear, to Jagland, who winced, and covered her mouth and nose. She passed the bone to me and I took one look and flung it to the floor. It skidded up to the lump of Peterson's body and stopped.

"It's a human iliac fossa," I said. "The hip bone, and it's fresh… or I should say, not fresh."

Just then, a booming noise echoed down from the hallway. Someone banging on the front door. The someone didn't wait, but threw the door open, causing it to slam against the wall.

"Hello, hello," a feeble male voice called.

Jay called back, "Everyone's in here."

An elderly couple, a hunched, white-haired woman holding two carry-on bags and wearing indigo blue running shoes leading an even older, bright-eyed man shuffling behind his walker, rounded the corner. Jay described the scene to his listeners, and holding his microphone, he approached the visitors.

"Who are you people?" the man said, glaring around the packed room, searching for someone to punch in the face, maybe. "Have you booked passage to Heaven, too? Mr. Peterson, the travel agent, said it was just two of us. Two passages for the Kirkpatricks from Denver."

"Mr. Peterson is dead," Jay said and gestured to the corpse.

"Is he now?" he said with a stunned, bewildered glower. "Is the voyage delayed, then?"

"Definitely."

"Damn it. How disappointing. But we'll expect a refund. Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick. And we'll need a place to live. We sold everything, bought one-way tickets, and left our retirement home."

"We're not married," the old lady said, swinging her bags as she cut an elaborate, silly caper in her blue shoes. "We're living in sin."

As I rose to my feet, I felt a sudden, harsh jerk, the same jarring sensation as when the solar system changed its motion.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick swayed to and fro until she suddenly, involuntarily, fell back upon on the couch behind her.

"We have arrived," Professor al-Saghani said. "We've more or less settled, somewhere."

"Come with me," I said to the perplexed couple, while helping Mrs. Kirkpatrick to her feet. "I have a place for you, at least for a while. Let me get your bags. I'll be in the caretaker's house," I said over my shoulder to Jay. "Check on Scotty soon, will you?"

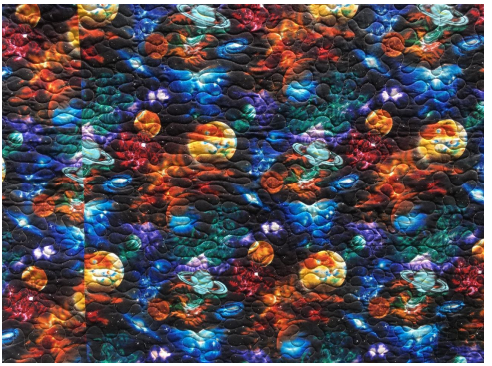
Mr. Kirkpatrick said angrily, "When do we eat? You all know, don't you, a bad, bad early blizzard is coming."

□

And so in cooking lunch for the Kirkpatricks, I discovered the neat, wrapped packets of flesh in Peterson's freezer, each packet labeled with a person's name. After I recovered from the initial shock, I made a vegetarian dish and helped the elderly couple settle in. I couldn't save my dear parents, nor could I prevent Peterson from dehydrating poor Ane to death, but even if this weird old couple never realizes it or cares, we saved their lives.

My next major problem was telling Jay what meat might have been in Peterson's delicious Danish ham stew.

END



“June Bug Egg Mass”

End Notes

Each of the Jonathan Barron stories originated uniquely over a fourteen year period, the last one written, Long Night, just recently. And I have another JB story in progress that's not in this collection. The title: "The Acme in Egg Evolution." The stories are listed here in the order they were written.

When Earth Whispers began while I was on a work project in Lynchburg, Virginia. And Lynchville happens also to be the former name of San Ramon, California. The actual setting, however, is where I live, Asheville, North Carolina. The newspaper stories from the mid-1940s are real, and can be found at the Pack Library. An earthquake is Earth whispering, and we ought to listen, maybe.

Turtle of the World. We as a family camped near Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest and visited the Forest itself over the years, beginning long before the woolly adelgid invasion. Our most recent visit was just a couple years ago. The giant hemlocks are dead, and the forest service, not quite smarter than the average bear, decided that visitor safety was a priority over preserving the stately standing dead trees. So, they decided to put the trees on the ground. However, the Forest is within a designated Wilderness Area where chainsaws are not permitted. So, the best option was to dynamite them, they thought, and that's what they did. Dynamite. Never mind that the point of Wilderness Areas is to preserve wild spaces "untrammeled" by humans, and that they are not by nature "safe."

If you are ever in western North Carolina, it is still worthwhile to visit the Forest where you can see the blasted, safe trees, as well as the enormous living, healthy Tulip Poplars and carpets of wildflowers.

The Cherokee man falling over the guardrail after the Falling Rocks sign is true, but it was my family and me who witnessed this event and gave him a ride home. He offered me a carved turtle as a thank you. We have about a dozen western hemlocks planted on our property, some of them 15 feet tall.

One of our favorite places to camp as a family with six children was Hunting Island State Park on the Atlantic coast in South Carolina. I could write a book about our adventures of a dozen summers and a few winter weeks there, so the area was an easy pick for the setting of **Odd Fellows**. The Marine Air Base, the bridge, and the library are real. Middleton is a family name of my wife's and she is descended from Arthur Middleton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. The story originated because I have a keen sense of smell and thought the story concept would be fun to explore.

Greenlandic Windows began as an interest in creating the largest space vessel ever. The solar system is a vessel, right? and we are its passengers. But what if it was made by somebody and the control center was right here on our planet?

The Long Night Awaits originated from my own experience of being unable to sleep and lying in bed for hours, my wife asleep in the room, so it has to be quiet and dark. It seems like forever. One way of coping is to get up and do something meaningful. I have spent many joyful night-owl hours at the dining table writing while listening to classical music. This pattern of sleep began soon after my father took his own life, and I was staying in my parents' apartment, a couple thousand miles away from my home, alone, and trying to help my mom, who was in the hospital. She passed away not long afterwards. My mom indeed grew up in Camas, and I did as well. This volume is the first-ever publication of Long Night.

Each of the JTB stories follows an identical, basic POV set-up. Each is narrated by a character other than Jonathan Barron, which is like the Sherlock Holmes stories, though in mine, it's a different character for every story.

Disclaimer: Keep in mind that the notes in this section, while virtually true, are to give you false confidence that these stories are fiction. Sensitive, observant souls will discern what's real. As Solzhenitsyn wrote, during the USSR's tyranny and absolute control over the public press, people learned to "read between the lines."

The author in Yoncalla, Oregon, 1953

Books by Mickey Hunt

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Just having survived alone through his first year of darkness, Ron Fjermestad lingers at Crown Park before sunrise and a brief, shallow, bright day in which he remembers nothing of what he endured, and which will only precede sunset and yet another Long Night.